

W. H. Auden and the Meaning of Lyric Poetry

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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My thesis proceeds from recent critical discussion about the status of the aesthetic object after the decline of high theory of the 1980s and 1990s. The term "singularity", articulated by critics working with the ideas of Martin Heidegger, has been variously applied to the artwork in the attempt to describe the generative power of art as separable from any historical or political determinants that may shape it. What makes the experience of art "singular", that is, an experience governed by the artwork itself, without the scaffolding of theory or context?

Such a question, I argue, actually demands a return to the first principles of close textual criticism, along with a rigorous approach to genre. The lyric poetry of W. H. Auden provides the ideal material for "singular" criticism. Unpacking the term lyric and redefining it according to Auden's particular poetics, I consider how Auden inaugurated a new manner of experiencing modern poetry based on the notion, implicit to the conventional understanding of lyric, of vocalicity. After an account of Heidegger's influence on contemporary ideas on aesthetics, I consult the work of Theodor Adorno, and later Hannah Arendt, in order to situate Auden's early work in a European context, opposing the Atlanticism which has governed the vast majority of Auden criticism. Working to restore the power of the first encounter with the poem to historically and philosophically nuanced textual analysis, I present the key works of Auden's early corpus in a new light.

W. H. Auden and the Meaning of Lyric Poetry

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Chapter One.

I - Introduction. The Experience of Poetry

This thesis stems from an apparently innocuous wish, but one which pertains to critical debates of many inflections. It is the wish to describe the experience of reading poetry. First, in a particular sense, the poetry of W. H. Auden prompted such curiosity, and will comprise the substance of this project. Second, I hope that descriptions of my experience of reading Auden might contain aspects that extend beyond the study of this one poet. The question about the nature of our encounter with poetry opens onto densely populated critical terrain where particular concerns about one poet or one period are always forebodingly shadowed by a cluster of general issues well noted for their seemingly intractable character, such as the relationship between aesthetics and society; the relationship between aesthetic experiences and other, different ones; the nature of poetic language and of poetic modernism; and the question of the proper ascription of academic periods and groupings. This is by no means an exhaustive or an especially exact list, but it gives an indication of some of the questions that will recur throughout my readings of Auden, and which will be meditated upon as I seek to prepare those readings with a number of conceptual prologues.

These conceptual sections proceed from the urgencies of the poetry itself. My approach is to venture a way of reading Auden that can be understood in contradistinction to the received critical material on his early career, without undermining the significance of this material. There is a neat synchrony to this project in that 2007 will mark the centenary of Auden's birth, but my attempt to read his work and to recount and consider the nature of meeting Auden on the page gathers its impetus from recent critical debates regarding the value of aesthetics. A variety of theoretical issues comprise the tributary streams leading into my discussion of Auden's early work. In tandem with a survey of these issues, this thesis will provide an account of Auden's place in the milieu of the 1930s and will look particularly closely at debates about the standing of poetry during the period in question. This dual emphasis will be present in close readings. I intend that they are as well attuned to the

theoretical as to the historical, but that they accord a crucial privilege to the personal meeting with a given poem, in an encounter which is finally irreducible to either a doctrinaire theoretical view or to a reconstructive approach along the lines of cultural history.

My approach to Auden hinges upon a speculative redefinition of lyric. Auden is frequently recorded (and just as frequently praised) as a lyric poet. His stature in the history of twentieth century poetry is at this point beyond question, and any attempt to read his poetry in a way that dissents from the acknowledged meanings of forms and genres runs the risk of being contradicted from numerous standpoints. But, as I will demonstrate, contemporaneous with Auden's career - though not perhaps to his direct knowledge - there were major philosophical voices contesting the received definitions and accepted meanings of art and, moreover, those of the lyric itself. Indeed, the lyric is vital to these voices as a tool to explicate wider ideas. Happily, these voices – of Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno – both speak (and argue with one another) to form the *fons et origo* of the theoretical issues which dominate contemporary discussions about the nature and value of aesthetics. Hence, to restate the dual emphasis of this thesis, there is an imperative not to hypostatise theory and history as separate entities, but, in light of Auden's early career, to bring them into an ongoing exchange with the poetry. Because of their historical proximity to Auden, and because many of the burning issues of European life in the thirties transcended national boundaries in obvious ways, the respective ideas of Heidegger and Adorno on aesthetics can contribute a good deal to our understanding of literary life in England at the time of Auden's early career, as well as providing the present day reader with the basis of a new vocabulary with which to describe what happens when he or she reads Auden.

In this sense I try to resist the Anglo-centrism (or Atlanticism) in Auden criticism: the tendency of Auden critics to give a solid narration of his centrality to local surroundings, but by the same token to neglect the opportunity to present Auden's work as a highly significant intervention in a broader, European philosophical argument about the nature of art and of poetry. This is not to reduce poetry to philosophy. My abiding preoccupation with the potential of the lyric, and the need to redefine it, is governed by Auden. Heidegger and Adorno offer the most

influential and conceptually robust explorations of what the lyric might be, and so this chapter focuses on their work to form a prelude to later close readings in which Auden's lyric takes centre stage. We will see that lyric is a very different thing to each of the German thinkers, and this first chapter will establish what those differences are and how they might inspire a modified understanding of Auden, his age and his subsequent reception. Thus we can arrive at a new account of Auden's poetics and a new interpretation of exactly what it is that makes his work so compelling to the individual reader, and so important to critics. The most appropriate way to preface the ideas of Heidegger and Adorno, for their part, is to consider some more recent statements on the possible value of the experience of art in the present day. Accordingly we can look to the sources of these positions and statements in the key texts of the two thinkers, and then broach a working understanding of what lyric means in the context of a study of Auden. Based on this, the second chapter will proceed by interrogating the notion of the Audenesque, and will then move into a consideration of the thirties through the prism of my own ideas about what the Audenesque actually signifies. I will submit that the methods and presuppositions of Auden criticism might benefit from being revised.

As I have suggested, there is an ever-present constellation of other projections and interests revolving around the experience of poetry. Such interests can be categorised and isolated (and I will discuss the formulation of each where it becomes pressing in the context of Auden's work), but the common basis of their attraction to art, and poetry specifically, is the possibility that the art-experience presents the means of access to an order of truth that is beyond the reach of other experiences. This truth is variously configured; for instance, art informs us about the nature of ethical life; or, art exposes the privations of our conditioned manner of thinking and reasoning; or, art reveals the reality of our communal existence. In each case, the affectivity of art is claimed in the name of a specific purpose, and each claimant formulates a version of a general practice (of ethics, for example, or of politics) from a particular and inexchangeably personal experience of art. Lyric poetry, and the consideration of what lyric poetry is, offers an ideal invitation to examine how and to what degree one's experience of art can be exemplary for the many. This is because lyric is curiously positioned to reveal much about the presuppositions of selfhood and communication proceeding from the philosophical heritage that has supported liberal

societies. I will elaborate on this point when summarising Adorno's ideas on lyric and aesthetics more generally. At this point it is more useful to provide more recent examples of the debate about art's potential. If we look at an example away from literary studies, we see that those perennial projections onto art have taken on a note of urgency in some quarters. It is clear that the avenue of correspondence between an intimate aesthetic experience and a generally applicable, philosophically articulated truth is frequently presented as direct and unobstructed. In one example notable for such urgency, (and notable for the way that it is evidently in dialogue with Heidegger and Adorno) John Gray considers how art might condition a new cast of thought that could challenge the ingrained rationalism of Western thinking, proceeding from the recent "cultural mutation" of classical and Christian morality:

We shall make the best of the opportunities this cultural mutation affords if we relinquish the grounds – metaphysical, transcendental or rational – on which we have run aground in nihilism...., we may then come to regard the world-views intimated in our culture lightly and playfully, as evanescent art forms rather than weighty representations.¹

Gray contends that art ought to be regarded as means of societal instruction, as an analogue, whereby the mode of thinking it encourages functions as a corrective to the universalising tendencies of humanist cultural practices. Gray is cautious, however, doubting whether public life as it stands could harness this potential; and we can clearly see how the consideration of the value of art is so often twinned with an ethical or political vocabulary:

It may be that the Western cultures are so deeply imbued with rationalism that they cannot tolerate a conception of ethics, for example, in which it is an aspect of the art of life, not to be distinguished categorically from prudence or aesthetics in its character, in which it shares with these practical arts a provisional character and a local variability...²

If, to thinkers such as Gray (for whom art is not a primary concern in itself), art might be the means of reorienting our thinking, then he is only one of the more recent thinkers and critics who consider this question in light of Kant's canonical study of

¹ John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1996), 152.

² *Ibid.*, 183.

the relationship between art, ethics and epistemology. A significant collection of essays entitled *The New Aestheticism*, edited by Simon Malpas and John Joughin, identifies the Kantian project as the starting point of modernity's fraught negotiation of the true value of aesthetics. The volume brings together numerous critics allied by an intention to see past the strictures of ideology critique that reached its apogee in literary theory in the 1980s and 1990s. Malpas and Joughin propose "the equiprimordiality of the aesthetic" which they define thus:

...; that, although it [the aesthetic] is without doubt tied up with the political, historical, ideological, etc., thinking it as other than determined by them, and therefore reducible to them, opens a space for an artistic or literary specificity that can radically transform its critical potential and position with regard to contemporary culture.³

What is advocated here is not a wholesale dispensation with the theoretical approach which took its force from the "political, historical" and "ideological", but a pursuit in criticism of the nature of singularity, a frequently recurring term in the post-theoretical critical landscape.⁴ Singularity refers to what the artwork inaugurates: what the experience of art, that is, the experience of a particular form of art (in this case, lyric poetry) creates for us. The critical frisson arises from the question of how that creation might be described, and, potentially, how it might be exemplary, or how it might apply to contexts other than the aesthetic. There is a paradox at the heart of singularity, then, or at least an irresistible temptation to reinvigorate discussions about the use and value of art that the term "singularity" itself, being redolent of "art for art's sake", seems to forestall. The temptation might be put as follows: The experience of a given work of art can be deemed singular by being irreducible to historical, cultural or biographical conditioning factors. But what value can be said to accrue to that singularity? What does the non-reducible element of the art experience teach us about such conditioning factors, having demonstrated their limits? Singularity is at once a restatement of the power of art and an invitation to reconsider

³ John. J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, eds., *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 3.

⁴ Timothy Clark provides a detailed study of the philosophical grounds of the term in *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the Later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005). Derek Attridge's elegant work *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004) takes a broader approach; the centrality of the category of form for Attridge is a clear indicator of Adorno's influence. I will elaborate how the question of form becomes crucial to a proper understanding of Auden's lyric specifically later in this chapter.

the relationship between art and its conditions, and this will be the basis for my approach to Auden's lyric.

Singularity needs to be configured more securely, in light of its philosophical heritage. In its present day coinage the term derives chiefly from Heidegger as we will see, and also, as Malpas and Joughin suggest, from the broader lineage of continental philosophy reaching back to Kant's three *Critiques*. It is worth quoting their sketch of this process at some length, as Kant's work is so often seen as the defining articulation of the scission of art from epistemology and ethics (a scission thoroughly scrutinised in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*). Malpas and Joughin condense the implications of Kant's tripartite project:

In the first two critiques, of pure reason (epistemology) and practical reason (ethics), a chasm between truth and justice is opened. Between epistemology and ethics, Kant draws a division that cannot be crossed. By arguing that knowledge is bound by the "limits of experience" which cannot be exceeded without falling prey to antinomy, he makes room for a separate ethical realm in which human freedom rests upon a "categorical imperative" that is not reducible to knowledge because it is not generated by experience. The third critique, the *Critique of Judgement* in which Kant discusses aesthetics and natural teleology, sets out explicitly to form a bridge between epistemology and ethics....The almost universally acknowledged failure of the third critique in this endeavour provides the philosophical premises for the separation of the value spheres in modernity [by which Malpas and Joughin indicate scientific truth and its derivatives, normative beauty and its derivatives, and culture as the aggregate of such derivatives], and yet the thinking of aesthetics contained there provides a series of political and theoretical possibilities taken up in the writings of both the Frankfurt school and post-phenomenological arguments of thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. In fact it is Kant's failure to reconcile epistemology, ethics and aesthetics in the third critique that opens a space for aesthetics within modernity which points toward the possibility of its having transformative potential.⁵

Singularity is one way that this possibility of transformation is pursued. In a sense singularity makes the best of a bad lot: art is condemned to be isolated and peripheral to our everyday cognition and to the structure of our societies, but this very separation may contain within it the seed of a transformation of consciousness. In the context of literary art, this "transformative potential" accrues to the moment of reading. Singularity denotes the element that makes the experience of reading unlike any other

⁵ Joughin and Malpas, *The New Aestheticism*, 10-11.

experience. It marks the attempt to reposition the literary artwork at the centre of our interpretation, such that it generates “transformative potential”. The question remains, what kind of consciousness is to be thus transformed? More pertinently, how would we characterise the singularity of lyric poetry?

In response to the first point, when we cast an eye over other contributions to *The New Aestheticism* it would seem that the temptation to configure the singular power of the artwork in terms of an extractable political example is strong. If the free-standing, interpretatively neutral generative power of the aesthetic is proclaimed, the next logical step is to interpret the generative power itself, as opposed to any ancillary meaning it may produce. The equiprimordiality of the aesthetic is an appealing *tabula rasa* on which to write one’s own preferences. The engagement with art can resemble a small-scale epiphany, its generative power coming to represent a higher order of communion. Andrew Benjamin offers a lucid example of this: his notion of “transformation” through “inclusion” sees in the generative power an analogue of cultural openness and transformation comparable to John Gray’s initial surmise.⁶ It is here, in the cognitive process of encountering the artwork, that an experience can be said to have repercussions that surpass the simple notion of interpreting what the artwork might mean. Our conception of democracy and the communal life is open to transformation: a transformation which represents a significant risk. The notion of risk – of exposure to difference which strikes at the heart of the presuppositions of a contented, non-reflexive version of subjectivity – is another important touchstone of singularity. The notion derives, as Malpas and Joughin indicate, from post-phenomenological thinkers such as Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. It is not necessary to give an exhaustive genealogy of this idea here. Suffice to say at this point that the tropes of risk and exposure that post-structural and deconstructive methods have bequeathed to literary studies comprise a bass note of possibility: the possibility that, after my encounter with the artwork, my thinking will be altered in ways that I could not surmise beforehand. This possibility is frequently articulated in terms of a reoriented political consciousness, or by fostering the recognition that one’s own position or critique is endlessly subject to opposition and expiration, so that the art experience forms a happy example of (liberal, democratic) political responsibility. But

⁶ Andrew Benjamin, “Including Transformation: Notes on the Art of the Contemporary”, *The New Aestheticism*, 211.

the issue encountered by critics such as Benjamin is that in practice, the experience of art is not always one of “inclusion”. On the contrary, it might be programmatically exclusive, and, we could say, all the more “singular” for it.⁷ Auden’s lyric poetry, with its oft-remarked difficulty, becomes salutary in this context. We will see in Chapters Three, Four and Five that the experience of reading his lyric is manifold. It includes moments of outright confusion and incomprehension, but such moments occupy one pole of an extraordinary poetic range, at the other end of which is highly accessible comic and light verse. This range gestures towards the full expanse of poetic possibilities in the age of mass society. The body of Auden’s thirties work constitutes what we could call a test-case for lyric poetry in twentieth century modernity and beyond. As we will see in Chapters Two and Five, the political is never far away from critical responses to Auden, but the proper sense in which we can call a given lyric political remains largely unaccounted.

Away from *The New Aestheticism*, and away from political approaches, two other recent studies offer examples of the growing critical intrigue surrounding the experience of reading, and invoke versions of the inaugural moment of encountering art. The earlier, Paul H. Fry’s study of Wordsworth, *A Defense of Poetry – Reflections on the Occasion of Writing* (1995) is steeped in the language of post-structuralism, and seeks to describe what is called “the ostensive moment” in reading, where the signifying process is shown to demonstrate its limit points.⁸ Here the generative power of Wordsworth’s poetry is said to present an insight into the primordial moment of language formation within cognition: the poem has privileged access into how we come to formulate our thoughts into words. Poetry is positioned by Fry on the cusp of the exchange between cognition and expression. The more recent example, which represents a desire to describe the aesthetic experience in non-theoretical terms, is given by Peter De Bolla, who in a consideration of a number of different aesthetic encounters (with painting, with music, with literature) also chooses Wordsworth to help evince what happens when one reads. De Bolla coins the useful phrase “the practice of wonder” to describe an experience which hovers between the expressible

⁷ Critics such as Thomas Keenan accommodate exclusion by theorising a clear relationship between democracy and difficulty based on the “withdrawal of the rules of knowledge on which we might rely to make our decisions for us.” Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1.

⁸ Paul H. Fry, *A Defense of Poetry – Reflections on the Occasions of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 11-14.

and the inexpressible.⁹ Both these examples are useful because they can help to clarify the philosophical bases of the singular art experience. In neither case is the experience presented as transcendental, which is to say, exterior to the artwork itself. Though it describes a general cognitive relationship, Fry's "ostensive moment" is fully appreciable only in the context of the engagement with poetry; De Bolla's "practice of wonder" describes a similarly immanent project that cannot be transposed to a sphere of experience other than the aesthetic. Singularity, then, represents the point at which the immanent capabilities of art are realised. Therefore the singularity of lyric poetry is an empirical rather than a transcendental experience, because it is made possible by (and so in a sense is confined to) our knowledge of the artwork, a point which Adorno will emphasise to ensure that the lyric retain its powers of critique. Adorno will privilege art with this unrivalled ability to expose and to criticise, but the experience it presents will be possible in terms of its form alone, precisely because it does not refer to any exterior (for instance moral, or theological) mandate. The temptation to take what we can take from the artwork and apply it to other areas of our existence, as if we were looting art for moral instruction or transcendental principles, is stridently resisted. But evidently Adorno, and many other critics of lyric after him, needs the power of poetry to be emblematic if not purposive. In other words art cannot be said to have a purpose (in the usual sense of fulfilling a pre-established function) but it must be able to illuminate aspects of our existence that surpass the confines of the aesthetic experience. Once again, recounted from this vantage point the 1930s comprise a crucial flashpoint in the history of the experience of art. The impassioned arguments surrounding the supposed value, purpose and possible illumining force of art among major intellectual figures of the day, including Auden himself, ought to impress their shape on all subsequent attempts to define the importance of the aesthetic. An account of more recent criticism of lyric, given presently, will correlate with a discussion of the thirties milieu in Chapter Two.

⁹ Peter De Bolla, *Art Matters* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 130.

II - Versions of Lyric

In placing the lyric at the centre of a thesis about the generative power of art we are on well-trodden ground. Many critics have attempted to elicit the curious “reality” of lyric: that defining aspect which seems to overcome the degrees of interpretative distance maintained in other forms and genres.¹⁰ The reality effect is closely connected to immediacy, and we will see that Adorno warns against enshrining immediacy simply for its own sake, for a number of reasons. It is instead necessary to determine how the lyric brings us closer. To consider the repercussions of these questions I will use the term *proximity*, which I will employ frequently over the course of this project when describing different encounters with Auden. In effect, the versions of lyric I choose to prepare my readings of Auden are divided between this section and the extended meditation on the Audenesque which will follow in Chapter Two.

The difficulties and controversies surrounding the definition of lyric help us to appreciate the potential pitfalls of submitting an abstract version of what comprises the form without sustained reference to the work of a given lyric poet. We will see that both Heidegger’s and Adorno’s versions of lyric are predicated on the work of particular poets (Hölderlin and Rilke in the former’s case, George and Mörike in the latter’s) and my descriptions of the distinctive characteristics of lyric will likewise be moulded by Auden’s work. (Furthermore we will see that the critical accounts of lyric that proceed from the interventions of Heidegger and Adorno have a tendency to favour a particular kind of lyric poetry, typified by Paul Celan, and that the term lyric is by no means exhausted by such work: Auden’s corpus presents a much-needed tonic here.) Yet there are still a number of valuable taxonomic accounts that merit attention. One is given by Kate Hamburger in *The Logic of Literature*. Hamburger also considers aesthetics from the standpoint of German philosophy, reviving the notion of *Erlebnislyrik* (the poem as experience), a term introduced by Hegel. Hamburger distinguishes lyric from fiction and drama on the grounds that lyric amounts to the statement of a subject about an object, rather than to the creation of

¹⁰ Anne Williams, *The Greater Lyric in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 12.

fictive subjects.¹¹ The reality effect here is found in an underlying assumption that the speaker of lyric, in being a “statement-subject”,¹² is more palpable than the fictive subject of the novel, the epic or the play, whilst not being reducible to a narrow equation with the poet himself. René Wellek mounts a detailed attack on Hamburger’s position in *Discriminations*, arguing that there is nothing in her analysis which upholds the essential division between what constitutes art and what does not. To Wellek, Hamburger’s scheme ignores art’s intrinsic “value-charge”:

The boundary between art and nonart, art and life, disappears in Miss Hamburger’s scheme, because she believes in the possibility of a purely phenomenological description of art apart from value judgment, from criticism. But it is a contradiction to speak of art as nonvalue or even disvalue. It is value-charged by definition.¹³

Such is the consequence of rooting an understanding of lyric in its fidelity to the “specific subjectivity of empirical experience.”¹⁴ How are we to grasp the singularity of what the lyric offers, in contradistinction to both non-aesthetic experiences and those presented by other forms of art? (Later we will see that Adorno also dismantles the *erlebnis* theory of art, on the basis that it tacitly reduces all experience to exchangeability; to Adorno “lived artistic experience” is tied to a philosophy that presumes the total power of conceptual thinking to comprehend and to render all aspects of life, at the expense of nonconceptual modes such as intuition, which have a crucial role to play in explaining our experience of art).¹⁵ Anne Williams builds upon Wellek’s concerns in her critique of Hamburger, interrogating the assumption of a stable subject in lyric. Williams argues that this is premised on denuding the problems of the lyric “I”:¹⁶ in what sense can we describe the speaker of lyric as a “subject” at all? What about those lyrics which do not seem to be uttered by a present “I”? On the basis of these questions, we can begin to see why the lyric poses such a fruitful field

¹¹ Kate Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, ed., trans. Marilyn J. Rose (London: Indiana University Press, 1973), 233-4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 234.

¹³ René Wellek, *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 227-8.

¹⁴ Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, 234.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed., trans. Robert H. H. Kentor (1997; repr., London: Continuum, 2002), 244: “The supposition of lived artistic experiences is based on the assumption of an equivalence between the content of the experience – put crudely, the emotional expression of the works – and the subjective experience of the recipient.”

¹⁶ Williams, *The Greater English Lyric in the Eighteenth Century*, 11.

of study to critics who take their bearings from post-structural theory and deconstruction. Stan Smith is one Auden reader who has found useful perspectives here (I will recount his configuration of Auden's work along these lines, with others, in the following chapter). Williams herself seeks to define lyric according to the formal contrasts invoked by Hamburger and other Aristotelian critics:

But if the drama is life observed, the lyric is life shared; that is, the lyric may be distinguished from other modes by the unique angle of vision it permits its audience – from the inside rather than the outside of its characters. The lyric perspective is akin to one from which we all experience “reality”; the peculiarity of the lyric poem is that it allows us to assume the perspective of another individual consciousness.¹⁷

This internality, or access to the speaker's perspective, is a common feature of post-Romantic descriptions of lyric, from J. S. Mill, to Lascelles Abercrombie, to Northrop Frye.¹⁸ The problem with “sharing” is its paucity as an account of the experience of reading. The lyric cannot simply be heralded as the means by which we “assume the perspective of another individual consciousness” without first describing how this is negotiated, in the moment of reading. Williams offers another, more nuanced definition which carries a greater sense of this challenge:

...the lyric mode exists in literature when the author induces the reader to know, from within, the virtual experience of a more or less particularized consciousness. When this aim constitutes the predominant organizing principle of a poem, we say that the poem is a lyric.¹⁹

A “particularized consciousness” need not explicitly present itself as the lyric “I”: this much I endorse. But I would argue that where Williams downplays the element of speaking in lyric (in trying to distinguish it from its dramatic cousin), this is in fact a fundamental aspect of how the lyric makes sense and affords us proximity to its moment. Susan Stewart, whose ideas I will present in detail in Chapter Six when Auden's lyrics' relationship to song becomes pressing, has produced valuable work

¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸ In Mill's view lyric is “the utterance that is overheard...feeling confessing itself in solitude”; for Abercrombie “the poet composes a delightful and exciting music in language in order to make what he has to say peculiarly efficacious in our minds”; for Frye lyric is “an internal mimesis of sound and imagery”. Quoted in *The New Princeton Dictionary of Poetry and Poetics*, 3rd Ed., eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 714-5.

¹⁹ Williams, *The Greater English Lyric in the Eighteenth Century*, 15.

on the centrality of voice and sound in lyric theory. She uses the term “promise” to introduce the importance of speaking and hearing poetry:

...the sound of poetry is heard in the way a promise is heard. A promise is an action made in speech, in the sense not of something scripted or repeatable but of something that “happens”, that “occurs” as an event and can be continually called on, called to mind, in the unfolding present.²⁰

Stewart’s “promise” refers to the dynamic between a speaker and a listener, or a poet and his or her audience. The proximal effect here is rooted in physical proximity: in direct audibility (and intelligibility) between speaker and addressee. When the reader speaks the lyric poem, however - outside of the physically proximate setting of speaker / addressee - then the role of voice and sound is modified. The solitary reader of lyric cannot be said to adopt the perspective of the poet entirely (we will turn to Adorno to dismantle this fallacy), nor do they adopt a position of neutrality or disinterestedness. I will seek to define Auden’s lyric with reference to this kind of proximity, which is at once a means of critical empowerment, and profound recognition of experiences exterior to our own.

Is proximity simply another way of describing the lyric’s commonly noted preference for abstraction and the rendering of the inner life? Helen Vendler’s recent work provides an elegant account of the nature of lyric, based on internality and the private experience. But the type of proximity she relates should be separated from the type arising from the encounter with Auden. Vendler writes:

The virtues of lyric – extreme compression, the appearance of spontaneity, an intense and expressive rhythm, a binding of sense and sound, a structure which enacts the experience represented, an abstraction from the heterogeneity of life, a dynamic play of semiotic and rhythmic “destiny” – are all summoned to give voice to a “soul” – the self when it is alone with itself, when its socially constructed characteristics (race, class, color, gender, sexuality) are felt to be in abeyance.²¹

For Vendler proximity is a question of abstraction; only once we have been shorn of our socially determined “self” can we appreciate the resources of our “soul”, and lyric can be described as the speech of the soul. Vendler’s is a subtle critique, and her close

²⁰ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 104.

²¹ Helen Vendler, *Souls Says: On Recent Poetry* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 6-7.

readings display an agile balance between fine detail regarding technique and contextual expansiveness. But to explain the proximal effect of lyric wholly under the aegis of abstraction might finally be too selective. Vendler is right to take issue with the reductionist trend in much literary criticism that amounts to little more than “a quest for a socially specified self resembling me [the reader].”²² But, again, to have recourse to a theologically inflected “soul” as the antidote to this is questionable. We need to keep the reader in mind here: Vendler’s “soul” is a description of the poet’s utterance rather than a marker for the reader’s response. Nevertheless, if the process of reading lyric – the proximal effect a successful lyric lends us – does depend on an element of abstraction from history and society, surely it can never fully escape them. Adorno will show us that the lyric’s retreat into abstraction can always be theorised in terms of the society and point in history that backlight it. Rather than perceiving social and historical binds as hindrances to our understanding, I aim for a sensitive description of the dynamics between the particular generative artwork and the contours of its paradigm. To properly relate the nature of Auden’s lyric proximity we need to turn our attention to the conditions for reading as well as writing. How was it that Auden, in his lyric, was able to create new ways of thinking in the 1930s? How does such a possibility continue to charge his work; or, put differently, what did the 1930s bequeath to lyric poetry in the modern age? These questions, comprising Chapter Two, will help us develop our understanding of the modern lyric’s proximal force.

In the context of twentieth century modernity, proximity becomes a fundamental issue with regard to reading lyric. Whether we can appreciably detect a coherent voice in a given poem, or whether its poetics vitiate this coherence, the lyric mode is still based on a verbal exchange *because we are induced to speak it*. Features such as metrical schemes, scansion, and sonority are living reminders of the musical grounding of lyric and the conception of the inter-subjective art experience that grows from musical performance. Such features are of course common to other kinds of poetic language; moreover, the phenomenon of voice is unquestionably central to all reading experiences, howsoever it may be effective in a given form.²³ When allied

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ In *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) for example, Eric Griffiths builds upon the work of Searle and Austin and considers the transition of meaning from page to voice

with the compression that finally distinguishes lyric, however, these features reveal their footing in the spoken voice. Compression signifies an occasion for speech, a privileged moment when address becomes possible. Poems which tactically subvert the aforementioned features – which work with dissonance, irregular meters or non-linear sequences of ideas, or which employ a compression so extreme as to confuse our understanding – can still be called lyrics because they are most comprehensively explained in terms of those conventional lyrical characteristics; they also cohere through the spoken voice. All such features are the components of a “particularized” voicing which does not obtain at the level of textual self-reference, but which reaches out to our own experience. Neither does my position relegate lyric to the lowly status of pseudo-drama. While we read lyric we are involved in a negotiation of meaning with a voice that is no mere projection of our own individual critical mores: as we will learn from Heidegger, the voice exists before that encounter as the generative source of lyric’s power. To say that lyric depends absolutely on the spoken voice would be hyperbolic and ill-judged: there is of course no binding reason why the encounter with a given example might not take place within the non-vocal confines of the text. But I will submit that by responding to the lyric with our own voices, the precise kind of materiality that lyric language possesses comes into sharper relief.

Auden’s work makes us aware of this materiality in various ways, and each lyric is finally discrete (though it is perfectly tenable to read Auden for a biographical, developmental history as we will see). Some of Auden’s lyrics encourage us to negotiate this meaning by actively frustrating our efforts. Others favour the simplest, most direct form of address and present their own critical issues that are, I submit, richer than has been previously allowed. But behind every encounter with any of the work I examine in the following chapters there is an assumption of speech,

in terms of the intonations and cadences frequently implied, or inferred by the reader in the transcribed text, from the perspective of the Speech Act. His study encompasses drama and fiction as well as poetry. In relation to poetry more specifically, Griffiths argues (67) that the quality of the voice is not reducible to authorial intent or to the reader’s active choice: “...voice is that which is decided *in reading* a text...such a decision is not a matter of the “choice” of a particular reader any more than it lies at the disposal of any particular writer”. Similarly, I do not contend that the voice of lyric is finally separable from its textual source, but submit instead that the full significance of Auden’s work is best elicited by considering the dynamic between the page and the reader’s voice. In the following chapter I will address the arguments of postmodernist critics who regard Auden from an exclusively textual standpoint.

encompassing both the voice on the page and our own reciprocating utterance.²⁴ This assumption creates the interplay between the distance assumed in reading a transcribed poem and the proximity achieved by speaking it that ultimately defines Auden's lyric. The "reality effect" of his work is hampered if we overlook the centrality of speech to our understanding of the form. Lyric singularity describes the possibilities afforded by this interplay. (There is, at bottom, a great deal of significance in Auden's deceptively simple definition of all poetry as "memorable speech.")²⁵ For this reason I think it is possible to speak in generic terms about lyric. Daniel Albright disagrees, making the valid point that genre depends on the maintenance of certain expectations:

But what do we expect when we are told that a work is a lyric? We do not expect any particular structure, though we may guess that the structure will somehow call attention to itself. We do not imagine that any special mood or persona will greet us in the text – tragedy has its frowning and comedy is smiling mask, epic offers its sober and strenuous paradigms of culture, but no passion or tenor is more lyrical than any other....Where nothing can frustrate expectation, there is no genre.²⁶

Albright prefers the modal term "lyrical", so as to avoid any limitations attendant to the generic approach. In contrast I argue that in fact we do carry expectations into an encounter with lyric, and that those expectations relate to voice, with its concomitant invitation to speak the poem ourselves. Albright is right to contend that lyric, in generic terms, is comparatively amorphous, but irrespective of period, style, "passion or tenor", a poem which foregrounds vocalicity – in its techniques and in the response it evokes – can be called a lyric (though this definition is not exhaustive, as typographical lyrics demonstrate).

²⁴ This is not to discount the bearing of textuality on the composition of lyric in the modern age; rather to distinguish Auden's lyric from the works of other poets, for whom vocalicity is something to be downplayed, or even on occasion proscribed. In *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), Hugh Kenner argues that the typographical context of the lyric directly influenced and shaped the form. His most compelling example is William Carlos Williams's famous *The Red Wheelbarrow*. Kenner remarks (60), "Not only is what the sentence says banal, if you heard someone say it you'd wince. But hammered on the typewriter into a *thing made*, and this without displacing a single word except typographically, the sixteen words exist in a different zone altogether, a zone remote from the world of sayers and sayings." We might say that in the final analysis, Williams's objective is to reserve a special place for poetry as something solid: something understood as the poetic compliment to (American, democratic) speech. Williams's discovery about the ability of typography to elevate the banal to the illuminative, and so to bypass the world of speech, is another method of locating the privilege of the lyric, favouring solidity rather than vocalicity.

²⁵ Auden, "Introduction to 'The Poet's Tongue'", *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings*, ed. Edward Mendelson (1986; repr., London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 327.

²⁶ Daniel Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 2.

The suggestion of speech in Auden's lyric, or more accurately, the inducement for the reader to speak the lyric in turn, is its defining mark; but each of his works will necessarily evoke and induce a different kind of speech. It is their musicality, the most common, readily identifiable feature of lyric, which encourages this emphasis on difference. Musicality is occasionally subverted, or is tested to its limits, while at other times it is wholeheartedly embraced in virtuoso performances. Thus broad taxonomic accounts of lyric musicality, such as is offered by Northrop Frye, are only partially instructive. Considering the elements of music that are patterned into lyric, Frye identifies two areas of importance:

One is that the lyric turns away, not merely from ordinary space and time, but from the kind of language we use in coping with ordinary experience. Didactic or even descriptive language will hardly work in the lyric, which so often retreats from sense into sound, from reason into rhyme, from syntax into echo....

The second factor connecting lyric with music is that for the most part, musical sounds are in a special area, different from sounds we hear in ordinary life. The poet, however, has to use much the same words that everybody else uses. In lyric the turning away from ordinary experience means that the words do not resonate against the things they describe, but against other words and sounds.²⁷

Frye's version of lyric is representative of post-Romantic accounts in that it describes lyric language as "turning away from ordinary experience": for him, the musicality of the lyric accomplishes this removal. He prescribes a remit for the kind of language which is acceptable in lyric and the kind which is unsuitable. It is in the nature of Frye's project to view the lyric ahistorically; he also gestures towards the idea that the lyric is a self-standing linguistic construct, whose relationship to its conditions of expression is secondary or else essentially peripheral. As I will argue in Chapter Six's discussion of the role of song in his work, Auden makes each of these premises questionable. Taking into account the direction offered by both Heidegger and Adorno, it is of limited value to apply pre-established categories of lyric to Auden, particularly when those categories would prescribe what the lyric can sustain. Instead we must keep in mind the way that Auden's intervention as a lyric poet effectively

²⁷ Northrop Frye, "Approaching the Lyric", Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, eds., *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 34-35.

creates its own terms of reception. Auden's lyric has its own musicality which I aim to describe, poem to poem. Close readings will expound his particular, and particularly divergent, kinds of lyric musicality. With regard to mimesis (in the Aristotelian sense of imitation, that Fry implies) the question of just what it is that Auden's lyric can be said to imitate is also an historical one, and is central to a lucid conception of his poetry's power; this will be encompassed by my discussion of the Audenesque which follows. Furthermore I reject the contention that because of its musicality, lyric language forecloses the freedom of the poet to include registers such as the "didactic" and "descriptive". Auden will use the lyric as the vessel for these and many other conventionally unlyrical registers. The key is that the structure of colloquy, given by a proximate speaking voice, is in place.

W. R. Johnson's revealing account of the development of lyric from its ancient beginnings to its modern incarnations offers a number of salient points, but his decision to read lyric history as a narrative of irreversible decline is perhaps too sweeping. Johnson identifies a number of accelerants behind this decline, and argues that when lyric lost its orientation around a direct addressee – when it compromised its bearings as an I-You exchange – it lost force and confidence:

...dissolved by the speculations of, among others, Hegel, Marx and Darwin, the lyric I grew first ashamed and bewildered, then terrified, by the idea of saying I, forgot how to say You, systematically unlearned emotions and their correlatives and their stories. Translated itself into, annihilated itself for, a technological mode for a technological age.²⁸

Johnson's bias is evidently that of a Classical scholar - the lyric lives only an attenuated half-life in modernity. He goes further, and avers that since its I-You basis became weakened, lyric has been trapped in a sense of protracted mourning. Its musicality is a remnant of what it once had, but can now never recover:

The absence of a real audience and the failure of performance engender an anxiety, a kind of bad conscience, a sense of the poet's irrelevance, impotence, and unreality – a frustration of function that the printed page, so far from being able to mitigate, can only intensify.²⁹

²⁸ W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (London: University of California Press, 1982), 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

Quite aside from the fact that Auden's love lyrics, as we will see in Chapter Three, breathe new life into the pronominal form that Johnson declares to be subject to "disintegration",³⁰ the "absence of a real audience" does not automatically mean a "failure of performance." It means a qualitative change in the nature of our experience of lyric, but the notion of performance is still intrinsic to the act of reading. This notion is not principally mournful in the sense of being narrowly retrospective and backward-facing. Rather, as I will propose in Chapter Three and thereon, it constitutes the means by which Auden's lyric achieves its power. If there is an intensification of frustration implicit in the writing of lyric in the twentieth century, then it is one that contrarily reaffirms the status of the lyric, and positions it centrally in a consideration of how the self, society and history are thought in the same process.

Johnson's dismissal of modern lyric is possibly due to his selective choices, but he does express a commendable suspicion of the epigones of Mallarmé (such as Gottfried Benn) who write a "fraudulent pure poetry", in which "no-one is talking to no-one about nothing".³¹ My attempt to see different aspects of Auden's oeuvre in terms of lyric is inspired by his subject-matter as much as his innovative poetics. When I read Auden (and I will pursue this point in response to recent critical accounts of his work in the next chapter), or rather, when I read Auden aloud, I nowhere receive the understanding that the theme or arguments of the poem in question are somehow secondary to the slippages of referential surety that characterise the system of language in general. Indeed, to fully appreciate Auden's power over his early readers and his continuing ability to compel, we need to situate the substance of his poetry – its topicality and urgency – in often highly specific historical contexts. I will return to Johnson in a different context shortly; it is worthwhile at this point to look at some influential modern practitioners of lyric theory who owe a greater debt to Heidegger and Adorno, in order to gauge contemporary preferences. From there we can proceed to a detailed explication of both thinkers' approaches and then, to conclude the chapter, consider why Auden's claim as a lyric poet needs to be stridently made in this context.

³⁰ Ibid., 13.

³¹ Ibid., 12.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has produced seminal work on the aesthetic object in *The Literary Absolute*, written with Jean-Luc Nancy,³² but it is the ideas in his own volume, *Poetry as Experience*, which are the more germane here. Primarily a meditation on the nature of poetic experience after Adorno's configurations of the limited possibilities of art, Lacoue-Labarthe's volume focuses on the work of Paul Celan to illustrate the conditions for poetic expression in the latter half of the twentieth century. This refers to Adorno's emphasis on silence in *Aesthetic Theory* (examined later in the chapter), itself a preference stated very much in light of the post-Holocaust age. It would obviously be anachronistic, not to say arbitrary, to apply this kind of thinking to Auden's thirties poetry, and the conclusions that Lacoue-Labarthe draws from his encounter with Celan (which is written in a highly subjective style that owes a good deal to Heidegger's writing on poetry) offer another imperative to situate Auden in his time rather than to apply pre-established critical ideas to his work. For Lacoue-Labarthe poetry is a radical removal from one's age. Recalling Heidegger's analysis of anxiety,³³ he uses the "dizziness" induced by a Celan poem to describe the way in which lyric poetry can avail the reader of a "pure suspension of occurrence".³⁴ Celan's lyric poetry is privileged in affording us respite from the usual (Cartesian) means by which we understand ourselves. Something of this privilege is present when we read Auden, but perhaps only because the "pure suspension of occurrence" is generic in nature. More than Lacoue-Labarthe allows, this kind of "suspension" has long been a feature of lyric.³⁵ To describe what Auden's poetry alone makes possible calls for a stricter sense of history. Lacoue-Labarthe says of the recent conditions for lyric:

...: there is no "poetic experience" in the sense of a "lived moment" or a poetic "state". If such a thing exists, or thinks it does – for after all it is the power, or impotence, of literature to believe and make

³² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: Theory of Literature In German Romanticism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).

³³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1962; repr., Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), I. 6. 40., 228.

³⁴ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 19.

³⁵ "Pure suspension of occurrence" is a guiding principle of Keats's Odes, for example. "Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see / The wingèd Psyche with awakened eyes?" ("Ode to Psyche"); "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music - Do I wake or sleep?" ("Ode to a Nightingale"). John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 3rd Ed., ed. John Barnard (1988; repr., London: Penguin, 2003), 340; 348.

others believe this – it cannot give rise to a poem....A poem has nothing to recount, nothing to say; what it recounts and says is that from which it wrenches itself away as a poem.³⁶

In the thirties, for reasons we will examine, the pre-conditioned separation of poetry from the kind of communication that dominated public life was less binding, in a way that brought into question poetry's very nature, and prompted some of Auden's most famous pronouncements on the limitations of art later in the decade (and indeed throughout his career). In the latter part of the century, Lacoue-Labarthe contends, poetry is valuable because it can wrench itself out of the language of the age, registering its protest at the conditions of selfhood to which the poet is subject in a manner that would surely please Adorno. But this is not how Auden always responds to the conditions of selfhood in the thirties. At Auden's time of writing the relationship between the private experience and the public life is being thrown into new light: the need to remove oneself from the age, on ethical grounds, did not exist; in fact, quite the opposite situation was seen to obtain. In the following chapter I will seek to establish as precisely as possible the effect of this on the lyric form, having first considered the meaning of the Audenesque.

Lacoue-Labarthe's work is also representative for a study of lyric because the poetry of Celan seems to exert an irresistible pull for both Heideggerian and Adornian critics. Celan is placed by Adorno in the tradition of hermetic poets (along with Mallarmé), and Adorno's summary of Celan's importance has evidently shaped many critical responses not only to Celan himself but to the conditions for lyric in light of his corpus:

In the work of the most important contemporary representative of German hermetic poetry, Paul Celan, the experiential content of the hermetic was inverted. His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative.³⁷

³⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, 19-20.

³⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 322.

Adorno's outlook informs Shira Wolosky's selection of Celan to illustrate her theory of lyric's "historicized formalism",³⁸ a formulation which might conveniently describe my approach, although she does not seek to describe her experience of reading, and in also focusing on Celan she chooses a poet ready-made to confirm rather than elaborate Adorno's ideas. As I have suggested, however, simply attempting to square such theories with Auden's lyrics without proper appreciation of the dissonance that proceeds from this meeting would be of minimal critical interest, and to conclude this chapter I will return to question of Auden's specificity over against the Celan-centric trend of Adornian criticism. From a Heideggerian perspective Carlo Sini contends that in Celan's hands writing "becomes a way of contesting and denying the metaphysical subject, the Western "historical" subject,..."³⁹ Recent critical accounts of Auden that I will discuss in the next chapter take a similar view, claiming him as a proto-postmodernist, and examining the nature of his attack on conventional Cartesian interpretations of selfhood. This strain of his poetry is only one aspect of its importance; indeed, we can only fully appreciate what Auden has to illustrate about twentieth century mass subjectivity if we first establish, and try to describe, what characterises our reading experience. Very loosely, Celan and Auden might be said to have something in common, but only in the sense that both are lyric poets.⁴⁰ Once again it is the intimation of vocality, of the spoken word, that shapes our encounter with the page. Yet if Celan's vocality can be understood as representative of a post-Holocaust ethics of protest, Auden's evocation of speech is used to a very different effect, one best understood by returning to the sources of contemporary lyric theories in Heidegger and Adorno.

III – Heidegger: The Inaugural Moment of Poetry.

Though it might surprise some readers, Heidegger's approach to poetry is at its most helpful at the level of textual analysis rather than high-flown generalisation: after all it

³⁸ Shira Wolosky, "The Lyric, History and the Avant-Garde: Theorizing Paul Celan", *Poetics Today* 22.3 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 656.

³⁹ Carlo Sini, "Gesture and Word: The Practice of Philosophy and The Practice of Poetry", *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History*, eds. Massimo Verdicchio and Robert Burch (London: Continuum, 2002), 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24. Sini writes that one of Celan's major themes is the "imperialistic subordination" of orality to writing.

is only here, in the moment of reading and in the often fraught attempt to communicate one's experience, that we find the acid test for the kind of projections onto the aesthetic recounted thus far. Those critics who, after Heidegger, would claim a transformative power for the artwork must first appreciate the relative caution of Heidegger's own schema. Heidegger's writing on art, and his writing on poetry in particular, must be aligned with his fundamental belief that Being or existence cannot be "directed" consciously, either by the individual or society; any suggestion of the purpose or utility of art is invariably scolded. Perhaps another important attraction of Heidegger's thought to a study of Auden is its usefulness in divining a notion of literary difficulty, and when we come to examine the meaning of the Audenesque in the next chapter Heidegger's framework will reveal its real value. But it is important to restate that this thesis is grounded in a response to Auden's poetry before all else. The philosophical validity of Heidegger's account of Being will not be interrogated. In discussing the respective ideas of poetic language held by Heidegger, and later by Adorno, this thesis does not purport to use such ideas as the occasion for a philosophical comparison (as valuable to such a comparison though they would be). Any points of comparison will be made in passing, with a view to clarifying the engagement with the lyric poem. In effect the approach will be to use Heidegger's discussion of language and poetry to enrich an understanding of the encounter with the lyric poem: an approach which does not finally enlist itself in a philosophical meditation on Being nor, in Adorno's case, on ideology. Likewise I need not consider at length Heidegger's notorious involvement with Nazism: where such ideas are seen to influence his notion of art they will be challenged accordingly. I reiterate: this thesis will take an immanent approach to Auden's poetry. It is not my intention to trawl Heidegger's work for points of correspondence between his ideas and those contained in the content of Auden's work. Rather, considering Heidegger's ideas on aesthetics can help expand our sense of the importance of the lyric voice, and so help us to refine an appropriate method of interpretation. The difference, then, is between an approach which focuses only on the content of the poetry, and one which attempts to describe how such content shapes our experience of reading.

The singularity of lyric and the nature of its inaugural dimension can be clarified when we look some of Heidegger's seminal works from the 1920s to the 1940s: chiefly *Being and Time* (1926) and "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935-6).

Using these texts and other relevant essays we can glean ideas regarding art's difficulty, art's supposed purpose, and the repercussions of the aesthetic encounter for the modern age. These ideas were conceived coevally with Auden's early career, and gestated within the wider European social milieu according to which English literature of the twenties and thirties understood itself. Indeed, *Being and Time* is clearly a key text in the history of European modernism. Though there is no direct dialogue between Heidegger and English poets or critics in the thirties, we will see that the respective trans-national scope of Auden's early lyrics and Heidegger's philosophy doubtless presses the need to contextualise them as parts of a common cultural landscape.

With respect to art's notional purpose, the process that Heidegger describes in "Origin", a process which overturns traditional notions of aesthetics, is in no sense prescriptive of action, understood crudely as the practical value of the artwork. The notion of usefulness, of a means-end relationship which would make such an idea possible, is contested throughout. Instead, Heidegger redefines art as a mode of "disclosure", and we can take his resistance to instrumentalism (integral to all aspects of his thought) as salutary. Art is an experience-in-itself. If we begin from here we can broach a revised conception of what it means to encounter a difficult work of art: difficulty takes on an entirely different valence. We can infer that the challenge of the work does not relate to the level of content – as if, however initially bemused by an artwork, we could proceed by dividing then reconstructing its disparate elements, with a view to reproducing a composite of the artist's original "frame of mind" (we will notice this approach to be common in Auden criticism). To Heidegger such a response, as part of the modern paradigm for thinking, is symptomatic of a condition of nihilism, geared essentially towards the reproduction of the same. As a matter of method, then, this anti-instrumentalist view is vital. In the context of literary criticism the instrumentalist view translates into an essentially biographical, developmental approach where the poet's work is condensed and narrated so as to convey the transitions in his or her "thought", as distinct from an approach which privileges the encounter with isolable poems. The latter will form the basis of my method of textual analysis.

In light of Heidegger's vigilance against the reproduction of the same, we can outline the appeal of the art experience. Art brings forth a revived conception of communal existence which, though not elaborated fully in "Origin", undoubtedly lends Heidegger's ideas on aesthetics their force. Indeed, it has been argued that this aspect of the communal experience in Heidegger defines the overall shape of his ideas in a way that is beginning to be fully theorised and thought through by commentators.⁴¹ The source of this communal motif can be found in section 1. 4. 26 of *Being and Time*, in which Heidegger describes how the metaphysical tradition of I / Other selfhood is premised on a crucial flaw:

By "Others" we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the "I" stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too.⁴²

Heidegger's understanding of the opportunities presented by art follows from this insight. The art experience illuminates an awareness of the self that is always intrinsically involved in communal existence and the reality of a shared material culture, before any ancillary theorising of the self as "I". The uniqueness of the art-experience is hence a testimony to one irreducibly particular response, which is only meaningful in light of its given situation in a particular human milieu. Thus the response to the artwork ought not to be celebrated as a triumph of subjective self-sufficiency which, Heidegger contends, characterises aesthetics as traditionally comprehended. On the contrary, the artwork implores us to embrace subjectivity, not as the means by which the subject reflexively knows and *then* places his or her self within the world, but as a condition which allows that act of reflexive knowing and placing to happen. It is this specific kind of cognition that enshrines Heidegger's notion of Dasein (being there) in art. The true art experience (and Heidegger's theories are unapologetically value-judgemental) realises the authenticity of selfhood. Art, that is, great art, discloses self-presence, which marks us as the bearers of Dasein. Man is the place where Being is; he is a generator of meaning; he is the source of time and so of history. The authentic work of art discloses how, at a given historical juncture, man might be the bearer of Dasein. This is the same as saying art creates or

⁴¹ Michael Lewis, *Heidegger and the Place of Ethics: Being-With and the Crossing of Heidegger's Thought* (London: Continuum, 2006).

⁴² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, I. 4. 26., 154.

makes possible new ways of thinking; new relationships between man and man; and man and the world at large.

It is thus that Heidegger's view of art can guard against a reductive approach to interpretation, provided that we do not simply raid the work of poets for their demonstration of Heideggerian ideas. Singularity represents the wish to free our experience of art from reduction to cultural and historical touchstones, but, as we argued previously, it also compels us to consider those touchstones in more depth. The generative power of the artwork, at its apex in great art, is truth-creating. As Timothy Clark puts it, the artwork performs "the terms even of its own legitimation",⁴³ so that art is bound, but not reducible to, cultural and historical milieus. If it were entirely separable from human activity and history, it could not disclose man's Dasein; if it were entirely reducible to them, then it would condemn man's imaginative life to empty tautology. The work's generative power guarantees that it can surpass what is said about it or derived from it in any one instance or by any consensus. Clark writes:

..., it [art] necessarily exceeds being understandable as the culturally determined product of its immediate circumstance or history.⁴⁴

This will define a point of contention between Heidegger and Adorno, and I will refer to their differences in this respect with a view to describing the force of lyric. To Heidegger the artwork represents a potential rupture, an instance which cannot be approached with pre-established categories of judgement or appraisal in mind, as if it were simply the bearer of its characteristics. Heidegger argues that our prejudice in this respect stems from the Latinate sources of our grammar, where a simple propositional statement consists of the subject (the core of the thing) and the predicate (in which the thing's traits are stated).⁴⁵ In truth, art presents an encounter that defeats all attempts at categorical thinking. Correspondingly the nature of the difficulty presented by the artwork is not the inability to make sense, be it wilfully or inadvertently. It is instead an intimation of a completely different way of sense-

⁴³ Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity*, 53.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Basic Writings from "Being and Time" (1927) to "The Task of Thinking" (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (1993; repr., London: Routledge, 2004), 149.

making, where knowledge is not synonymous with fixing, with defining or with controlling; where the subject knows the object - and is known - through continuously changing interrelations. In the context of poetry this presents us with a version of difficulty. But Heidegger's description benefits from its more profound understanding of the experience of difficulty: it does not simply refer to the narrow definition of the difficult as that which is not easy to comprehend. What separates Heidegger's sense of the difficult from a more conventional categorical problem is the way in which, far from blindly pursuing certainty or reassurance as an end, it retains an awareness of the privations that we feel during such an encounter. De Bolla's "practice of wonder" is clearly the progeny of this challenging ideal. By engaging with the experience of lyric language, we are implicitly asking questions about the received limitations of our subjective capacity, and so starting to reorient our view of how that capacity might be operative in ways that, prior to our encounter with the lyric, we did not fully appreciate.

In "Origin" Heidegger continues to think through the philosophical gravity that the encounter with art exerts. Though the reader necessarily brings a unique personal history to the artwork, the cumulative notion of self-knowledge prized by western metaphysics - as testimony and proof of "who I am" - is shown to be altogether too static. Having brought the vagaries of conventional self-knowledge into sharp relief, the work is no longer seen as offering a complete remove from the norm, but is in fact the paradigm of how we can think and who we can be. Heidegger uses the term "world" to connote what the artwork makes possible:

To be a work means to set up a world....

The world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are at hand. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things. The *world worlds*, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being. Wherever those utterly essential decisions of our history are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Basic Writings*, 170.

Heidegger can hence proclaim art as the origin of the historical: the historical defined specifically as that which makes possible new conceptions of truth which circulate amongst human beings as they interact. This is the latent potentiality of the poetic: the actuating of the historical. George Steiner, in his work of 1978, “On Difficulty”, addresses these questions under the heading of ontological difficulty:

Ontological difficulties confront us with blank questions about the nature of human speech, about the status of significance, about the necessity and purpose of the construct we have, with more or less rough and ready consensus, come to perceive as a poem.⁴⁷

Steiner’s proceeds to refer to Heidegger in his work, and is undoubtedly justified in doing so. Yet as he freely allows,⁴⁸ his own project - one of classification – demonstrates the critical difficulties in writing about the difficult. As soon as we gather our critical faculties and strive to contextualise Heidegger’s notion of difficulty, we find we have relinquished the opportunity that it presents: we have robbed it of much of its power. Steiner’s definition, given above, is predicated on the self-consciously critical mindset that is all but unavoidable when we examine those “blank questions” rather than experience them. With Heidegger, the difference between examination and experience is marked, and is of fundamental importance. We must seek a mode of analysis that, as far as possible, partakes of the experience of reading lyric, without over-reliance on critical taxonomies.

Again, Heidegger’s writing describes a condition of difficulty that operates without conventional ontological assurances; one that does not pursue certainty as we would usually recognise it. At first glance, this idea is redolent of Keats’s familiar notion of negative capability, “...when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason-...”⁴⁹ This capability, identified by Keats as the proof of Shakespeare’s artistic greatness, is a

⁴⁷ George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 41. Vernon Shetley follows Steiner when he distinguishes between obscurity (which refers to those elements of language that resist easy semantic processing) and difficulty (which refers to the reader’s response). Vernon Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* (London: Duke University Press, 1993), 5.

⁴⁸ Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, 19.

⁴⁹ John Keats, “To George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 (?) December 1817”, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 43.

useful entry into the Heideggerian moment, available to thinking both within and without an artistic context. Heidegger asks, what is left of thought in such moments of “uncertainty”? What does this tell us about the nature of thought? His move is to theorise this kind of capability by pursuing the negative into the positive, that is, by developing it as a means of exposing the true contours of thinking and experience independent of their object, not beholden to “fact & reason”, in the form of the instrumentalist principles we normally rely on. Thus when Heidegger writes about the literary artwork (Greek tragedy, in this case), we can extract a rich interpretation of difficulty based on this uncertainty:

In the tragedy nothing is staged or displayed theatrically, but the battle of new gods against the old is being fought. The linguistic work, originating in the speech of the people, does not refer to this battle; it transforms the people’s saying so that now every living word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and unholy, what great and what small...⁵⁰

Written at a time when Heidegger’s relationship with the Nazi Party was still functioning,⁵¹ “Origin” contains numerous references to “the people”, or to “an historical people”.⁵² It is not within the remit of my study to interrogate Heidegger here; what is immediately important is that to Heidegger, the significance of art depends on a cultural plane in which the “battle” for different meanings can take place, and so where a “world” can come into being. Behind Heidegger’s possibly dubious rhetoric is a point which is surely obvious: art has to be the site of a clash of meanings. It is the place where some kinds of common experiences and ways of thinking (in the simplest sense of “common”) give way to others. This is why art can properly be deemed historical; it is also the thrust behind art’s inaugural potential.

This passage can also help us define lyric difficulty. One definition of “difficult” is “hard to resolve or extricate oneself from”; one definition of “difficulty”

⁵⁰ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings*, 168-169.

⁵¹ Rudiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (1998; repr., London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 299.

⁵² Victor Klemperer records, in *The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. Martin Brady (2000; repr., London: Continuum, 2006), that the Nazis took “the historical” as one of their central categories, and that it was “used from beginning to end with inordinate profligacy” (40). Similarly the category of “authenticity” was a commonly used ideal. Such a lexicon is, beyond question, shared by Heidegger; the extent to which his application of these terms correlates with the Nazis’ is the subject of Adorno’s *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (1973; repr., London: Continuum, 2003).

is “a quarrel”.⁵³ What Heidegger recounts as being “put up for decision” here is also implied to be the literary artwork’s peculiar power to affect: the decision presents the point at which the will of the work to mean and the will of the recipient to understand converge: and the repercussions of the decision, as he describes it, extend beyond the aesthetic. If the basic process of sense-making is understood as a type of quarrel (between established notions of how things are meaningful and new challenges to those notions) then what is put up for decision, and who exactly are the quarrelling factions? What is at stake in literary difficulty?

“Putting up for decision” might be re-expressed as, determining meaning and ways of thinking for a collection of people. Heidegger’s point is that in the literary artwork the decision is never ultimate: it is always provisional. Literature (or, *dichtung* in Heideggerian terms) is an ongoing tribunal – a quarrel of sorts. The generative power of art ensures this process: it is necessarily anti-teleocratic, eschewing the notion that the final significance of a work of literary art can be fixed. Art generates meaning, but no meaning is protected against the drift of human experience. So in the encounter with art new experiences first find expression and so come to being, in what Heidegger calls an “opening”. Opening is the central premise of Heidegger’s thoughts on art. It is presented as the co-foundation of “world” and “earth”. The “world” of the work, detailed above as the unique mode of consciousness and sphere of possibilities that the artwork gives rise to, enters into a ceaseless struggle with the “earth” from which that artwork derives: earth being the material out of which the work is formed (language, in literary art). The process by which earth and world interact, and by which meaning is created, is attested in art.

Clearly the power of poetry can be explicated using this terminology. Elsewhere, in “What are Poets for?” his lecture on Rilke, Hölderlin and poetic language given on the occasion of Rilke’s death in 1926, Heidegger writes,

It is because language is the house of Being, that we reach what *is* by constantly going through this house.... All beings,...each in its own way, are *qua* beings in the precinct of language.⁵⁴

⁵³ Definitions given in *The Chambers Dictionary: 9th Edition* (London: Chambers, 2003).

⁵⁴ Heidegger, “What are Poets for?”, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadler (London: Harper and Row, 1971), 132.

By “constantly going through the house” Heidegger means: by constantly contesting meaning - shaping new meanings, and allowing older meanings to pass. The privilege of poetry lies in its elevated position in the midst of this ongoing (and non-teleological) process. At its most ambitious, Heidegger’s argument contends that the fundamental status of the subject as conventionally defined by Western metaphysics, and its adherence to the principles of Cartesian selfhood, can be put at stake. The conception of literary experience (and so of difficulty) we derive from Heidegger is indeed a test, but a test of our capacity to intuit the contingencies of our own thought, to confront our own position as the site of meaning’s continual creation and passage.

How else can the ideas presented in “The Origin of the Work of Art” be said to pertain to poetry, and to the lyric in particular? How do we approach Heidegger’s notions of language in light of lyric poetry? First, we need examine the way in which Heidegger describes the artwork becoming manifest in its material, using the term “figure”;

Createdness of the work means truth’s being fixed in place in the figure. Figure is the structure in whose shape the rift [that is, between earth and world] composes itself.⁵⁵

The idea of the figure calls for a sensitive re-evaluation of what we would normally understand as art’s materiality. It is not simply a description of form, nor of content – in the case of lyric poetry figure refers to more than the component parts of its versification and its subject matter. It also refers to the trajectory of thought – the processes of thinking, association and opposition emergent in poetic language, which bear the imprint of their origin in a linguistic communion prior to conscious subjective involvement (another way of phrasing “the rift between earth and world”) from the perspective of the poet. This much is meant by figure, as the lyric stands as a material object, produced by an author, transcribed on the page. But Heidegger’s analysis leads to the consideration of another latent aspect of lyric’s materiality, often overlooked. The forms of lyric poetry, and the modes of thinking which are embedded in those forms, are rooted in lyric’s original vocal form. It is my contention that we can understand the experience of reading Auden’s poetry more rewardingly if we retain a sense of how lyrical language conditions a sense of the poet’s vocalicity in our

⁵⁵ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings*, 189.

imagination, and how that exchange between reader and poem can be deemed significant in the context of twentieth century modernity, and in the present-day.

Heidegger provides another valuable term with which to define this method of interaction, this exchange between poem and reader. To Heidegger we “preserve” what the poet has created. We preserve the poem’s potential to generate meaning, meaning which can be a radical departure from all precedents. Heidegger’s formulation of this resonates for lyric poetry:

Preserving the work does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work. Thus it grounds being for and being with one another as the historical standing-out of human existence in relation to unconcealment.⁵⁶

In lyric poetry, preserving amounts to an engagement in the performance of the work. I will keep this notion of performance at the forefront of my response to Auden. As we consider how the poetics of lyric – voicing, techniques, and conventions – enable this idea of the experience of reading, we can step back from the address of the lyric on its own terms and contextualise the paradigmatic significance of this exchange between poem and reader. As conventionally presented and theorised, as we saw in Helen Vendler’s work,⁵⁷ it is accepted that lyric poetry is the voice of the private experience. This, as I will demonstrate, needs to be reassessed according to the terms of twentieth century modernity. I will submit that we can see the span of Auden’s work in the thirties with renewed intensity through the prism of vocality, whilst avoiding the pitfalls of simply narrating his development. Instead I seek to gauge how the great variety of his output over this period configures performance at different instances, in different lyric moments. Heidegger himself makes no explicit attempt to theorise lyric along these lines, other than a noticeable emphasis in “What are Poets for?” on “song”.⁵⁸ Yet his abiding fascination with poets such as Rilke, and especially Hölderlin, indicates that it is the economy and implied musicality of lyric which sanctions his most ambitious projections onto art. (Elsewhere the closest he comes to explicating the importance of lyric’s musicality is in a lecture on Hölderlin’s “Germanien”, where, as Timothy Clark notices, he describes “the fundamental tone”

⁵⁶ Ibid., 193.

⁵⁷ Vendler, *Soul Says*, 6-7.

⁵⁸ Heidegger, “What are Poets for?”, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 97.

of the poem in essentially musical terms).⁵⁹ I will propose my own configuration of Auden's lyric musicality using a collection of other sources. At this juncture, it is sufficient to state that Heidegger's concept of preservation introduces the subtle balance between lyric and reader that I will try to describe, in real time as it were, in my close readings of Auden.

III - Adorno: Complicity - Lyric's Privilege.

I have stated that my approach to Auden will be defined against those which are premised on ideology critiques, so the centrality of Adorno to my theoretical framework may be viewed as suspect. As is the case with Heidegger, I am not seeking to co-opt the theory of a given thinker wholesale; rather, I search for newly illuminating ways into Auden's work based on those points which are particularly salient, from the standpoint of immanent readings of Auden. Adorno's vision of the lyric's historical capability is too compelling to overlook, and the apparent synchrony between aspects of his thought on aesthetics and aspects of Auden's poetics is indeed pronounced. Hence before we examine Adorno's ideas regarding the specific potentialities (and hazards) of the lyric form, our analysis will be strengthened by an overview of his philosophy as expounded in *Negative Dialectics*, and by recounting how these principles colour his *Aesthetic Theory*. The essay "Lyric Poetry and Society" pre-dates these works by some ten years, and it is clear that the consideration of the lyric presented Adorno with a crucial catalyst in developing his arguments about aesthetics generally. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of the dimensions of the lyric's power to Adorno is best elicited through reference to the major works, so that the nuances, insights and prejudices we find in "Lyric Poetry" can be placed in their proper context and critically assessed for the sake of Auden's work.

Negative Dialectics comprises Adorno's most exhaustive assault on the established practices and suppositions of philosophy, whether in the form of the

⁵⁹ Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity*, 54-5.

traditional epistemology of the Kantian heritage or the fundamental ontology constructed by Heidegger. In their place he proposes dialectical principles, borne of a rational epistemology that takes Kantian categories as its starting point,⁶⁰ and elaborates them into a critical *raison d'être* for which the experiences of disillusionment, confusion and subjective disarray play a decisive role. His position might be summarised thus: Concepts do not exhaust the thing conceived; they leave a remainder (comparable to Kant's thing-in-itself, or the element(s) of the object inaccessible to our experience and understanding).⁶¹ Adorno's method proceeds from this:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy.... It [contradiction] indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.⁶²

This remainder, this excess, defies those cognitive principles tested in accordance with a specious Cartesian tradition based on a purportedly insuperable separation of subject and object, because this tradition is predicated on the total correspondence between the object and concept. This is what Adorno calls identity thinking - the blanket assumption that the world *is* exactly as I think it - which becomes the target of his entire philosophy. Whatever falls outside of the habitual equation between object and concepts is deemed contradiction, but to Adorno, this merely demonstrates the limits of conceptuality. Contradiction guarantees the inexhaustibility of the object, and proves the failure of conceptuality. It is from the excess of the object, related to its priority before subjective engagement – that is, related to the object's historical determination of the limits of possible human knowledge and action (another Kantian stipulation) - that the reified structure of society stems. The development of society and the development of identity thinking move in tandem, with the supposedly limitless resources of conceptual thinking as their article of faith. But to Adorno this is an untenable supposition. As such he speaks of the opposition between the reified conceptual order and genuine “thinking”, where the latter must

⁶⁰ Brian O' Connor, “Adorno, Heidegger and the Critique of Epistemology”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 24. 4 (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 44.

⁶¹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (1973; repr., New York: Continuum, 2002), 5.

⁶² Ibid.

interrogate what the former screens.⁶³ We can already divine a connection between the excess of the object and the singular theory of the artwork, enlisted by the project of genuine thinking.

When the thing conceived is a work of art, its excess provides us with a unique opportunity to illuminate the structure of society, albeit fleetingly (we recall Malpas's and Joughin's account of this opportune excess from earlier in the chapter). To Adorno, it is the privilege of art to intuit non-identity: to elude the grasp of identity thinking. Identity thinking underpins the exchange principle that has sullied and warped human relations in the capitalist age, reducing quality to quantity and stifling the particular under the universal. Yet, in accordance with dialectical understanding, art is irrevocably contaminated in its own production and reception by the predominance of identity. Just as art thrives on non-identity, so too (along with philosophy) does it provide a working example of subsumptive identity-thinking: capitalism is perpetuated and fed by the assimilation of the non-identical, bringing it under its reductive norms. The proof of the true art experience will depend to Adorno upon its resistance to this assimilative practice: he will advocate a mode of artistic empathy between particulars, which he terms "mimesis".⁶⁴ I will build upon this description of art as a privileged meeting place for particular experiences in my account of how lyric poetry is experienced: it will become a vital part of the conception of vocality underpinning the lyric encounter.

Although they are undoubtedly the twin pillars supporting the critical positions held in *The New Aestheticism*, we must not elide Adorno and Heidegger. Rather than aiming for a procrustean synthesis of their ideas, we need to attend to their many differences, so as to draw on their separate perspectives in close readings. Their own extended philosophical antagonism is not my subject. But in the specific context of aesthetics, it is important to note that Adorno is the more cautious with respect to the potential generative power of art. Adorno is deeply sceptical about any vaunted immediacy of artistic address. In contesting immediacy - the correspondence between subject and object, self and Other that Heidegger's fundamental ontology

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 114.

implies as viable - Adorno imposes strict limitations on the possibilities of experience, a point that will resonate through his ideas on aesthetics:

The confidence that from immediacy, from the solid and downright primary, an unbroken entirety will spring – this confidence is an idealistic chimera. To dialectics, immediacy does not maintain its immediate pose. Instead of becoming the ground, it becomes a moment.⁶⁵

Recognising the transience of the immediate forms the basis for Adorno's artistic mores, shaping his value-judgements regarding what can truly be called artistic. Without such recognition, without such implicit awareness of its limitations, contaminations and failures, art can only contribute unthinkingly to the identity paradigm, rendering it completely worthless if not actively pernicious. No credo can be built around the immediate experience. In describing the often insurmountable barriers between human beings as they interact, *Negative Dialectics* also encapsulates Adorno's pessimistic conception of artistic and critical communities and their diminished possibility of conveying the truth about the fate of the particular experience in modernity. Supplementing his rigorous dismissal of immediacy, he warns against the kind of homilies that would see unity and equality where there is actually only fracture and privation:

Criticizing privilege becomes a privilege – the world's course is as dialectical as that. Under social conditions..., it would be fictitious to assume that all men might understand, or even perceive, all things. To expect this would be to make cognition accord with the pathetic features of a mankind stripped of its capacity for experience – if it ever had this capacity – and by a law of perpetual sameness.⁶⁶

Art can make a kind of recompense: it can still harness cognition to the service of real experience, but, true to the real divisions described here by Adorno, this potential is by no means accessible to all. The determination of experience by the object necessarily implies significant differences between our respective abilities to perceive. Furthermore – and crucial to the literary arts – cognition can only be theorised and properly described in its actions, that is, in its manifestation as language. Adorno posits linguistic content as the bearer of the reality of a historical

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 40.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 41.

milieu, because that content is assailable and ever-changing, not pre-determined: it is the objective proof of historical motion.⁶⁷ As critics of the lyric, then, one of our tasks is to comprehend the possibility of this motion. Put differently, we need to understand how history conditions the possibilities for artistic expression in a situation where, outside of an aesthetic setting, full communicative freedom cannot be assumed. It follows that the reality of identity thinking might well *decrease the scope* for meaningful communication between human beings, but, contrariwise, it will exponentially *increase the value* of that communication, enshrined as it is in something as rare as artistic expression. Turning now to *Aesthetic Theory* we can glean further insight into this, the governing paradox of Adorno's scheme: the real, existing potentiality of an art that is everywhere hindered and debased.

Aesthetic Theory advances a principle of artistic integrity based upon the self-recognition of the various sins of art: sins that are written into, or crystallise within, its substance. In short, art is inextricably linked to society, and society is always culpable. Because of the determination and contamination of art by a given historical milieu, art "acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of"⁶⁸, intrinsically opposing a version of social unity which will always be specious, and will always be rife with contradiction. We know from *Negative Dialectics* that all objects present something excessive to our perception, but the excess of the artwork is different. In art, this excess records the imaginative violence that is required to project a representation of a unified society, violence that has its material corollary in political oppression and domination. Behind the smooth veneer of the work of art, stifled testimony to a world of suffering is heard. Suffering is absolutely central to Adorno's aesthetic theory. Adorno alludes to the philosophical precedents as well as the contemporary urgency of his position:

Though discursive knowledge is adequate to reality, and even to its irrationalities, which originate in its laws of motion, something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge. Suffering remains foreign to knowledge;...Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany. In an age of incomprehensible horror, Hegel's principle, which Brecht adopted as his motto,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 3.

that truth is concrete, can perhaps only suffice for art. Hegel's thesis that art is consciousness of plight has been confirmed beyond anything he could have envisioned.⁶⁹

Art, then, is redeemed by its non-unified elements: those elements of the work that scupper its purported unity, and which complicate the artwork's easy circulation within the normative boundaries of a historical period. To Adorno art is duplicitous and yet, as he indicates above, it may be the best way of exposing the reach of suffering into all aspects of life. Art professes to represent as unified what is wholly divided, whether it is the unity of a self, a body of people, or a historical period. But critical interpretation allows for art to make use of its complicity. Art is meant to be interpreted, rather than consumed; with the right critical approach we can tease out the record of violence and oppression that art crystallises in its very forms. Because art and criticism are two parts of an inseparable whole, and because both move synchronically, we have to recognise first the transience of any consensus surrounding the artwork, and, in the same gesture, its inexhaustibility. This is one of the most important bases of singularity.

As well as the overall shape of Adorno's ideas on art, the exact terminology of *Aesthetic Theory* should be examined in order to properly approach lyric. Given that literary difficulty is a long-standing critical issue with Auden, we might begin with Adorno's notion of "enigma", and "enigmaticalness".⁷⁰ It ought to be borne in mind that any points we can extract in relation to the poetic experience here need not describe a particular style or genre of poetry - one that is, like Auden's early work of the twenties and thirties, renowned for its difficulty. For Adorno the genuine art experience transcends the particulars of content, though it is only possible and explicable according to them. Nevertheless, Adorno's thoughts on modernism, and the emergence of what Steiner would deem "tactical difficulty" in the modernist period are crucial to our understanding. Enigma here is not a glib synonym for something problematical. It prompts instead another instructive recognition of limitation. Continually confronted by the "empty gaze" of the artwork - the productive power described earlier which interpretation cannot exhaust - the critic must concede in advance his or her powerlessness:

⁶⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 120.

The solution of the enigma amounts to giving the reason for its insolubility, which is the gaze artworks direct at the viewer....What the enigmaticalness of artworks refers to can only be thought mediatedly.⁷¹

Enigma describes the experience of the artwork's victory over our identity-driven conceptual apparatus, which applies to works of art that crystallise their social conditions and so point beyond them. Adorno argues that canonical works - those which are culturally revered and whose meaning is seemingly firmly placed within a cultural landscape – reveal their incomprehensibility at the point at which opinion concurs on them; likewise, difficult hermetic works, like Celan's poetry, are potentially the most comprehensible. The concurrence of opinion on the artwork would ascribe permanence to the critical edict, which is in fact entirely contingent. Received opinion is merely an index of one historical moment which, if hypostatized, mirrors a pernicious idealism that would install a false generality over the particular. Difficult hermetic works can in fact present an unrivalled comprehensibility because their manner of retreat from society; society's over-arching shape and nature will cohere in the form of the work. The process of interpretation is in any case one of unceasing contest because each attempt to understand is historically determined, and therefore is bested in advance by the artwork's inexhaustibility.

Adorno preaches contingency over constancy, then: the element of constancy in the artwork ("this work of art has always meant *x* rather than *y*") is entirely groundless because the object determines subjective capability differently at different points in history. This is not to do away with the idea of meaning altogether, but to recognise the historical bases of meaning. Accordingly the most challenging operation of informed criticism is to see the singularity of the artwork not solely in terms of sameness (for instance, "this work of art is timeless") but in terms of the diversity of history. By the same token we have to understand why it is that interpretation, almost by instinct, is predisposed toward sameness:

Enigmaticalness peers out of every artwork with a different face but as if the answer that it requires – like that of the Sphinx – were always the same, although only by way of the diversity, not the unity

⁷¹ Ibid., 122.

that the enigma, though perhaps deceptively, promises. Whether the promise is a deception – that is the enigma.⁷²

Just as critics are confronted by this sameness, which invites transcendentalism and a turn away from history, some artworks perform an illusory rehearsal of transformation whilst ultimately iterating a false “ever-the-same”,⁷³ on the level of technique. The crux of the issue is the difference between novelty and innovation. Here, Adorno’s criticisms of modernist practice come into view, and these points will come to bear on my discussion of the Audenesque in the following chapter. Jay Bernstein has interrogated Adorno’s thesis on modernism (which argues that the fetishizing of novelty leads to the scission of art from historicity)⁷⁴ and has found that he (Adorno) can compensate for modern art’s paralysis only through recourse to the critic. Yet this does not downgrade the status of the work of art: if we contend that the artwork ought to float in rarefied air, and that the business of criticism is always finally immaterial, then we have actually reneged on the promise of the work where we thought we were upholding it. Singularity does not unthinkingly revere the generative power of the work, and it does not displace the critical response: instead that response is lent redoubled importance. Adorno’s schema allows for a robust discussion on value, with historicity, vitality and resistance to identity thinking as the central criteria of artistic worth. In a modernist setting, the critic must determine the success or failure of an artwork according to whether it crystallises the given dimensions of oppression (material or psychological) that apply at a given time, against any shallow fetishizing of novelty. Such a critical imprimatur will be seen to apply to a discussion of Auden’s lyric innovations and his distinctive style.

To further explicate Adorno’s attack on sameness and the nihilistic and regressive tendencies of art and criticism we need to discuss Adornian “mimesis” in more detail. Mimesis works in tandem with the enigmatic. Through the enigma, we see that art can be the victor over our conceptual vocabulary; through mimesis, we see that this victory leads to concord between particular experiences, concord which the domination of the concept otherwise makes virtually impossible. Mimesis

⁷² Ibid., 127.

⁷³ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁴ Jay Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation From Kant to Derrida* (1992; repr., Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 190-1.

describes the circumvention, through art, of the usual channels of concept formation, whereby experience is appraised according to pre-established (hence constrictive) general concepts. Conceptuality is not jettisoned (it is a constituent part of thinking per se); instead it is propitiously balanced with other forms of knowledge. In the art experience the binary opposition between concept and intuition is not so weighted in favour of the former, and meaning is seen to arise through the interaction between conceptual thinking and intuitive feeling in the moment of artistic immersion. Mimesis refers to these moments of balance that we experience when we engage with art, when the particular experience crystallised in the artwork is allowed to convene with my own particular response. Mimesis, then, is a mode of empathy with a defining privilege: it can preserve the particularity of both experiences - the experience attested in the artwork, and the experience of the reader, listener, or viewer. This is the privileged nature of the lyric poet's art; it also describes the experience of reading lyric poetry.

Mimesis represents a point at which Adorno's schema becomes purposive on its own terms, and his presentation of the idea has an ethical tincture. As Bernstein writes:

Mimesis is appropriation without subsumption; in it the appropriating subject likens herself to the object, reversing conceptual appropriation; it is a relation of particular to particular.⁷⁵

Mimesis makes us aware of the particularity of our response, in contrast to Kant's categorical imperative with its theorising of a general moral position. History and culture guarantee that our experience, and our response to the experience of others, is particular. But in a society in which the particular is always subsumed under the general – where the individual experience counts for nothing unless it is articulated in terms of a generally applicable concept, and so is effectively erased – the communion of particular experiences in art offers the glimpse of an alternative system of recognition. Recognition of the particular is the only morality worthy of the name in a reified society.

⁷⁵ Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 201.

Such an alternative system, however, cannot be transposed to experiences other than the aesthetic. As long as society remains reified to the current extent, then this system can only be hypothetical. Yet the experience of art is an empirical experience. It is real; it is given by the senses; it is a form of empirical knowledge. (The question of the status of the art experience – the exact form of its reality and its possibilities and limits – will be seen to be the leitmotiv of thirties intellectual debate.) If we are fully to remain in the art experience that illuminates the falsity of normal subjective identity-thinking, this convening of particulars must not be understood as the communion of two “lived experiences”, but must rather foreground the aesthetic context of their communication. More concisely, the art experience *is* the occasion for communication, in the sense that such communication will exist only in terms of the aesthetic. So for all of its potential ethical force, the experience of art only relates to the reality of ethical decision making by proxy. The determining aspect of the art experience is its very resistance to wholesale applicability to social reality, an applicability which the narrow interpretation of art would instigate as a kind of reflex. To Adorno there can be no equivalence between, and no transposition of, the experience of art and the experience of empirical reality.

Conversely, this resistance of art to fungibility is the proof both of its real worth and its limitations, and here we can address Adorno’s notion of “shudder” to conclude our discussion of *Aesthetic Theory*. Shudder will relate to Auden because it articulates the idea, developed in “Lyric Poetry and Society” as we will see, that the lyric form transgresses its time-honoured classification as the utterance of pure subjectivity. Shudder complements mimesis in providing a further sense of the objectivity – that is, the extra-subjective quality – of art. Where mimesis describes the convening of particular experiences, shudder indicts the general condition for life and thinking in a reified society. In effect, shudder is a characteristic of modernist art; or, is characteristic of that art which strives to surpass sameness and identity. As such, it is felt as shock, disorientation, and displacement. Shudder describes the point at which conventional concept formation is revealed as contingent, and here the distinction between the art experience and normal cognition is at its most marginal (though crucially, it is upheld):

The shock aroused by important works is not employed to trigger personal, otherwise repressed emotions. Rather, this shock is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing; the possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes tangible.⁷⁶

Art's privilege is to de-egotise the ego through shudder, in such a way as to demonstrate the centrality of the vision presented by the art experience to the material real; shudder is the final vindication of art's objective truth. Mere awareness of the chance - forever deferred - to leave the confinements of the self behind may seem like scant consolation. But we must recognise here the beginnings of a profound acknowledgement of one's limitations, which in turn vindicates the potential for genuine knowledge of historical operation and the scope for critique within a given milieu, shorn of any idealism.

Having provided an overview of Adorno's theories on aesthetics, we need to examine his thoughts on the lyric form especially, to prepare our approach to Auden's work. Written in 1956, "Lyric Poetry and Society" fulfils a comparable function to Heidegger's writing on poetic language of some thirty years previous; Adorno takes the opportunity to project systematic philosophical ambitions onto the form and workings of lyric. Lyric is hailed in the essay as a working example of the wider, pre-established truth. In Heidegger's arguments against the narrow account of self-reflexivity according to Western metaphysics, this wider truth is ontological. In Adorno's case, the lyric becomes the index of the dialectic of individuality and social consciousness and practice. On account of the historical accretions that have gathered in the lyric – the notion of blissful retreat from social reality; communion with nature; unrivalled emotional freedom – Adorno clearly senses in the genre the base elements of his aesthetic theory. His theory is a re-reading of the conventions of lyric, and this is important because my reading of lyric will depart from such conventions to a degree, though not always on a parallel course with Adorno. Essentially Adorno retains the long-held view of lyric as the safe-house of a special kind of subjective expression. (In this conventional definition of lyric we have a voice speaking to itself, or else speaking to privileged intimates.) He recounts the means by which the poet's speech in lyric represents a retreat from the public life and the life of society – an

⁷⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 244.

intensifying of subjective isolation that can be read as the extension of normal reified consciousness. This in turn initiates a dialectical process which brings about an awareness of the subject's determination by the object and vice versa. The force of the poetic experience is hence manifested as a "moment of self-forgetting" (it is clear that Adorno is writing against Heidegger here):

The moment of self-forgetting in which the subject submerges in language is not a sacrifice of himself to Being. It is not a moment of compulsion or a force, not even of force against the speaking subject, but rather a moment of reconciliation; language itself first speaks when it speaks not as something foreign to the subject but as his own voice.⁷⁷

The lyric mode offers the prospect of an emancipation of the subject, where the false, tautological understanding of the inner life - the inner life as testimony to the surety of the status quo - is exposed as baseless, and so, potentially, as alterable. Language indexes the objectivity which accrues to every subjective expression. The lyric is potentially a bastion against false immediacy, crystallising in its poetic form the operations of the societal determination of the self. If we turn to the lyric for joyous accounts of the immediate moment, we risk blinding ourselves to the privations that are endured in the present; we complete the circuit of identity thinking; we praise what is at the expense of what might be. The primary attraction of the form consists here, in the scope it offers Adorno to correct the championing of immediacy for its own sake, and to think past the immediate moment towards its conditioning factors and the possibilities of thinking that it still contains, unbeknownst to us.

A typical lyric is something of a tightrope walk in Adorno's eyes. It is beset by an obvious danger due to its starting point, a position of "unrestrained individuation".⁷⁸ Put differently, the poem might merely fetishize its own retreat into subjectivity rather than bear witness to its historical situation. Here we ought to elaborate on Adorno's working definition of what constitutes a lyric poem, because certain features need to be in place for his theory to stand, and we will see that Auden's work presents other, contrary lyric possibilities. Adorno's theory of the interpenetration of form and content – that which gives rise to an aesthetic testimony

⁷⁷ Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society", Brian O'Connor, ed., *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 218.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 213.

to social reality - operates without serious complication with regard to conventional lyrics, as his analysis of Mörike's "On a Working Tour" illustrates. There is, however, a marked preference in the essay for those lyrics which acquire their force through the power of suggestion (Stefan George presents Adorno's other test-case). Referring to *Aesthetic Theory*, then, we can safely assume that explicit social content (which smacks of heedless protest) and fruitful aesthetic crystallisation of the social real (through the pronounced individuation of the "I") are mutually exclusive to Adorno. He prescribes a particular formula for lyric:

[The] historical relation [between subject and object] must have been precipitated in the poem. This precipitation will be more perfect, the more the poem eschews the relation of self to society as an explicit theme and the more it allows this relation to crystallize involuntarily from within the poem.⁷⁹

The question is evidently related to interiority. I would contend that in lyric, the explicit thematization of such a relationship does not preclude spontaneity; in fact, as Auden's work will be seen to demonstrate, that explicitness can actively encourage it. There is surely a difference to be maintained between the lyric that unthinkingly parrots the voice and perspective of the general and the lyric that involves and rehearses such a voice, as one of many inflections. In Auden different registers of language - social (proverbial, colloquial, journalistic) and intellectual (scientific, philosophical, theological, anthropological) – are juxtaposed in such a way as to elucidate the operations of a historical milieu, which is, in Adorno's terms, precipitated by the poem. Yet, aside from the specificity of Auden's poetic practices and the prejudices of Adorno's conception of lyric, "Lyric Poetry and Society" still provides us with a firm basis on which to discuss the potentialities of the lyric, giving us a vocabulary to describe the kind of insight into communicative processes and the intense dynamism of poetic language that characterise the encounter with lyric.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 217.

IV – Auden’s Lyric in Light of Heidegger and Adorno

Those stipulations regarding the encounter between Auden’s work and Adorno’s theories remind us that, before we embark on a discussion on the 1930s and Auden’s place within them, it would be preferable to summarise how both Heidegger and Adorno will be at their most insightful to a thesis on Auden. Equally it is important to consider how their ideas might need to be qualified or challenged in this context, in the hope that such points will lead to a fresh understanding of Auden’s poetics.

We recall Heidegger’s point in *Being and Time*:

By “Others” we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the “I” stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too.⁸⁰

When juxtaposed with Auden’s work and the mass society of the 1930s, Heidegger’s understanding of the “I” as undistinguished from the “Others” a-priori takes on a different gravity, and here we begin to approach his significance as a theorist of twentieth century lyric. To Heidegger twentieth century man is losing his capacity to be the bearer of Dasein, or to be the site of new instances of meaning. Increasingly the parameters of his thinking are determined by technology, which exponentially reduces his ability to “care” for “the clearing of Being”,⁸¹ or to be the bearer of any meaning other than instrumentalism. Heidegger’s writings lead us to doubt whether art, as the vessel of disclosure of man’s Dasein, is even possible now, given that the technological age has left man experientially benighted to a dangerous degree.⁸² But Heidegger’s theories on the artwork are separable from his own preferences. We need to avoid elevating Heidegger to the level of a supreme arbiter, because we might lose sight of what we can learn from Auden’s work in immanent terms. That said, I submit that Heidegger’s account of the fundamental lack of distinction between “I” and “Others” offers an important route into Auden. Where this lack of distinction has

⁸⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, I. 4. 26., 154.

⁸¹ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” [1948], *Basic Writings*, 231.

⁸² Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” [1953], *Basic Writings*, 331. Heidegger summarises the nature of the danger: “...the unconcealment in accordance with which nature presents itself as a calculable complex of the effects of forces can indeed permit correct determinations; but precisely through these successes the danger may remain that in the midst of all that is correct the true will withdraw.”

obtained in all human affairs throughout history, in the early twentieth century it develops to form the basis of a new kind of mass politics, a new way of organising culture, and in Heidegger's view, a further estrangement of man from the truth of Being. The polemic emphasis of Heidegger's theory of Being ought not to be pasted onto my approach here; instead my attention is aimed at the truth-creating qualities of Auden. Lyric has the capability to provide unique insight into the thinking and expression of man facing this profound sea-change in history. Auden's lyric, specifically, will be drawn into the tussle of individuation in mass society, but it will not invariably protest this situation. Often we will hear Auden's lyric voices find new possibilities of expression by immersing themselves in mass social thinking and being, and later we will turn to the work of Hannah Arendt – sometime student of Heidegger and developer of his philosophy – to clarify exactly how Auden's work finds its power in this historical setting. Heidegger's insistence on art's gift to found truth,⁸³ to prompt the circulation of new meaning among human beings, is a fitting description of what Auden's lyric achieves in the 1930s, but precisely because Auden's lyric voices are manifold. If Heidegger's pessimism about art's potential in the twentieth century is questionable, it is because he does not consider what contemporary history (as the latest development in the destiny of Dasein) makes possible for art. Auden's lyric range is the measure of his grasp of this potential, and the index of his historicity. This thesis is divided into chapters such that his range is properly conveyed and theorised.

Further qualifications relating to Auden suggests themselves. Heidegger's schema, needless to say, is deeply selective, and the suspicion remains that his terminology is prescriptive and in the final result contradictory. If we subscribe to such terms as earth and world, and the version of their interaction which defines art's power, what is left of the sense of total possibility that charges Heidegger's ambition for art? Here, the criticisms of Heidegger made by Jay Bernstein in *The Fate of Art* can allow us, somewhat inadvertently, to sharpen our understanding of how best to approach Heidegger in the context of Auden's work, especially with respect to literary difficulty. Bernstein contends that Heidegger's thesis is finally unconvincing in that "By personifying the elements in works [referring to the friction between earth and

⁸³ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Basic Writings*, 202: "Art is the setting-into-work of truth."

world] Heidegger displaces our entanglement with these elements.”⁸⁴ To Bernstein, the trials of subjectivity that Heidegger gestures toward are transferred to the artwork, a transference which hastily naturalises the engagement and suppresses any element of individual empowerment, and so any element of essential possibility. (Adorno avoids the same charge by making the project of art and interpretation essentially critical. As we have noted the aesthetic confines of the art experience can then be theorised as a reaction to and an indictment of identity thinking).

However, Heidegger’s theories are valuable because he gives us a framework with which to keep the response to the lyric – the experience of reading – at the forefront of our account. The key terms in Heidegger’s theory in “Origin” for a discussion of lyric are “the figure” and “preserving”. The figure compels us to understand the spoken basis of lyric language’s materiality. Thus, if we understand the notion of “preserving” on this basis, which, as I argued earlier, in the context of lyric must mean an active role for vocality as the basis of our response to the work, then we keep open the freedom of the poem to describe other experiences than the distant encounter between earth and world. This way we can meet the demands of a particular lyric and explain how it inspires the reader to think anew, rather than sketchily describing the poem as a ready-made instance of the tension between grand Heideggerian concepts. In effect, Heidegger’s work on poetic language encourages the vocal approach; that is, through his emphasis on the materiality of poetic language Heidegger makes us aware that in the moment of reading lyric it is voice which strikes us first, and which provides the framework in which other features of our response (to the themes and subject matter of the poem, for instance) become coherent and expressible. But the vocal approach needs to be properly theorised, and possible objections considered before I introduce textual analysis. The structure of my thesis proceeds according to this need; to fully convey how Auden’s voices, experiments and poetic range interact with the necessity to “preserve” the lyric through speech, and to properly situate these issues in philosophical and historical contexts, I will employ the terms “monody” and “chorus” at the beginning of my close readings in Chapter Three.

⁸⁴ Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 121.

Adorno's suspicion of immediacy will hence serve as a useful counterpoint to a vocal reading of lyric. I will contend that, far from prompting something akin to the affective fallacy or "lived aesthetic experience" (where we as readers speak and second the lyric's content unreflectively), the vocal approach encourages an acute awareness of form, and is in fact the most incisive method of critique. To hold the utterance of the lyric as primary is to subject our own thinking process to a sharper degree of critical reflexivity, as that process unfolds. This way, we bring our response as close as possible to the truth contained in the lyric's form whilst assessing and reflecting upon it, which is the by-line of Adorno's aesthetic theory. The emphasis on speech and vocality presents a tonic to a conventional poetic exegesis that is too secure in its concepts and discursive footholds; Adorno's ideas encourage us to question our confidence in discursive, ideational approaches to Auden.

These qualifications on immediacy are sponsored by Adorno's philosophy of history, and his ideas are also pertinent here because of the significant historical remove between Auden's early career and the present day. Adorno teaches a strict historical method, which can be summarised thus: Against any transcendental idea of poetic insight or assumed poetic community, the presuppositions I bring to the poem are historical, and it is hence illogical to seek to explain the experience of the poetic engagement in transcendental terms. But the power of lyric to connect is finally upheld. Critical responses to lyric are predicated on the paradox of a common history between poet and reader as it is felt in all its uncommonality: the historical particularity of my experience is an irreducible factor of my interpretation, yet that particularity is knowable as such only when set against the particularity of another (as connoted by the term *mimesis* in Adorno's work), attested in the lyric. The difficulty arises because this communion of particularities cannot be configured as pure and total: it is everywhere mediated by certain historical conditions that could potentially obscure *how* I think: conditions that could allow me to assume a false immediacy between subjects and across history, which does not exist. Vitally, however, it is in the nature of cognition to continually reach after this connection. As Jay Bernstein writes, cognition possesses an "inner impulse...to know what is other as such..."⁸⁵ Such an "inner impulse" will underpin the nature of our encounter with Auden's lyric

⁸⁵ Ibid., 228.

poetry. Lyric's ability to crystallise the defining social and cultural elements of a given historical juncture is again best elicited through an emphasis on speaking and vocality; the convening of particular experiences in lyric is, correspondingly, rooted in speech and the vocal.

With crystallisation in mind, we come to an awkward question. We saw that Heidegger's concepts of "figure" and "preserving" strengthened our grasp on the elements of vocality patterned into the lyric form. But is it tenable to adopt Adorno's notion of art's crystallising power, whilst altering our interest in what can be crystallised, away from Adorno's preoccupation with identity thinking and economic relations? In short, can we separate Adorno's method from his philosophy? An answer might be that, to Adorno, identity thinking and economic relations are the most urgent and operative symptoms of how we live and think, therefore they demand sustained critical attention. But for the notion of crystallisation to work at all – for identity thinking to be thus exposed in the artwork – surely it is necessary for the scope of crystallisation to incorporate the grounds of those symptoms, from which other symptoms might also develop, and which might be visible in the lyric? Adorno argues that, *pace* Heidegger, no such ground can be thought, and that the pursuit of ontological grounds without reference to specific objects and concepts is entirely bogus ("thinking without a concept is not thinking at all").⁸⁶ Instead, our knowledge is subject to strict limitations which are determined by the development of the capitalist exchange principle, howsoever it may configure the object, hence howsoever it may condition our subjective knowledge. To Adorno, then, identity is not a symptom of how we think, but vice versa: how we think is a symptom of identity. But will identity thinking infect every attempt at expression? Even if identity is an unavoidable concomitant of the capitalist paradigm, is there not space reserved for lyric to crystallise experiences and perspectives that do not finally pertain to identity and the reproduction of sameness? The key to resolving this is found in the theorisation of the object. If the inexhaustibility of the object is upheld, as Adorno clearly contends, then such a space for unforeseeable experiences and perspectives has to be posited along with it. In this sense Adorno's theorisation of the object prefigures or suggests the basis of singularity.

⁸⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 98.

There can be no prescribed remit for the quality of poetic expression even when the conditions for that expression are limited and determined by history, because, to Adorno, art represents a form of knowledge in which conceptuality and intuition are more evenly balanced. The historical determination of the subject by the object is always precipitated in the lyric form, therefore it can always be said to testify to identity thinking. Adorno's point is that those responses which merit close attention are achieved at the cost of struggle: a breaking beyond the abiding parameters of thought and experience, which is detectable in art's form. For Adorno, the point of art is precisely to testify to such struggle, and this accounts for his own tastes and preferences. The case for Auden, however, does not need to be made with this notion of struggle at its centre, though it is possible, as recent critics have done, to describe his work using such a vocabulary. I will submit that Auden's range, including his sustained interest in light verse, impels us to rethink this stringent Adornian framework, whilst keeping Adorno's stipulations about the possibilities of poetry in mind. Ultimately, I make room in my discussion of lyric form for the role of speech, whereas the Adornian model of lyric is exclusively textual. This difference will become important when we look at post-structural critical responses to Auden.

The issue of preference leads us to the final aspect of Adorno's value to a study of Auden, relating to the nature of Auden's modernism. As I have established, it is clear throughout *Aesthetic Theory* that Adorno's ideas are charged by his admiration for certain artists, such that many of his terms (like shudder) seem to be descriptions of a particular response to art, elevated, perhaps, to the status of a general value. Schoenberg and, in literary matters, Beckett are the exemplary modernists to Adorno. Beckett is praised for the "silence" patterned into his work, which is the root of his aesthetic protest against the dominance of ideology.⁸⁷ I have already remarked upon the critical championing of Paul Celan, and noted that his work presented clear grounds for readers working with Heidegger and especially Adorno to demonstrate their ideas. Other critics turn to Celan as the avatar of modern

⁸⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 134: "On the basis of their truth, of the reconciliation that empirical reality spurns, art is complicitous with ideology in that it feigns the factual existence of reconciliation. By their own apriori, or, if one will, according to their idea, artworks become entangled in the nexus of guilt. Whereas each artwork that succeeds transcends this nexus, each must atone for this transcendence, and therefore its language seeks to withdraw into silence: An artwork is, as Beckett wrote, *a desecration of silence*."

lyric, which is entirely justified in many respects, but which ought not to detract from the broad range of lyric possibilities that Auden's work bears out. What about a poet for whom the best artistic response to his milieu was not the silence of trauma, but, on the contrary, one of renowned expressive confidence, in places one of outright verbosity? This question ought to be posed as a counter to Celan-inspired determinations of the lyric. William Waters's sensitive study of lyric address concludes with reference to Celan, noting approvingly (and with a Heideggerian inflection) the German poet's approach to poetry "as a means of real contact".⁸⁸ Waters's emphasis is not on the actual voice, however, but on the implied vocative dynamic of "I (poet) / You (reader)" which, much as it did for W. R. Johnson, defines the lyric form. The reading experience thus revealed is intensely intimate, but Auden's work suggests that this version of lyric ought to be expanded.

We will see Auden - from his difficult, near-encrypted earlier lyrics to his highly accessible light verse - is testing what can be expressed at his time of writing. Silence may convey suffering and the immolation of the particular in literal terms, but Auden's poetic facility speaks a related, but distinct recognition. As a lyric poet he records the particular experience, but occasionally in the language of the general, to imbue the currency of mass communication with new powers to bear meaning. Auden's lyrics mark a place where divergent particularities approach one another. They are mimetic in the Adornian sense, but the nature of their modernism should be articulated outside of the circle of post-war practitioners favoured by Adornian critics on account of their traumatised aesthetics (again, this is effectively a question of historical specificity). Preferences aside, then, Adorno's aesthetic theory gives us the vocabulary to situate Auden in his milieu. Finally, with his rigorous reading of immediacy and crystallisation, Adorno provides the appropriate circumspection to the essential feature of my account of Auden's lyric, which is the proximity achieved between the spoken and the written word. I will introduce the terms monody and chorus in Chapter Three to describe the differing effects of this proximity as we encounter it in various styles and lyric modes. Respective surveys of the Audenesque, of Hannah Arendt's philosophy and of the status of poetry in the thirties given in Chapter Two will prepare this introduction.

⁸⁸ William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 159.

Chapter Two: The Lyric in the Thirties.

I - The Meaning of the Audenesque

The bulk of this thesis will consist of close readings of Auden, but the term “Audenesque” ought to be considered, being a vital strand of previous approaches to his work. What are its features, and what kind of significance has been inferred from or projected onto it? What relationship is there between Auden’s poetics – gathered loosely under the heading “Audenesque” – and the approach to lyric based on vocalicity? These questions require an overview of Auden’s early poetics, which will serve as preparation for later close readings. Later in this chapter I will survey the ground of literary debate in the thirties, and so situate Auden’s work in the first stages of its circulation, but an appraisal of more recent critical submissions on what it is that characterises Auden will allow me to define my approach in contradistinction to others.

The hazards of paraphrase and the possible violence of catch-all terms (such as “Audenesque”) are underwritten in Auden criticism by the need to explain the recurring difficulties of reading him, from a surer conceptual basis. It is not surprising, then, that the critical orthodoxy centres upon what we could call the instrumentalist view, whereby the poetry is read as the practice of a pre-existing theory. Auden’s career is often narrated in terms of the theories that fired his creativity; some of which he discarded, while others led into wider systems of thought. This approach is certainly valid in many respects, and perhaps receives its most compelling endorsement from Auden himself, whose cast of thought was professedly rational, systematic and analytical, as demonstrated throughout his journals and criticism.⁸⁹ At every stage in Auden’s critical reception there have been readers who have sought to reconstruct the wide tableau of his intellectual range, or to present the poetry as an ongoing meditation on the condition of the individual and society which, most perceptibly, used the language and concepts of Freud and Marx. Indeed, it was Auden’s clear conceptual facility and broad philosophical and

⁸⁹ Auden, *The English Auden*, 332-342. The essay “Psychology and Art To-day” (originally appearing in *The Arts Today* edited by Geoffrey Grigson) is an especially good example of Auden’s analytic, taxonomic gifts.

psychological learning which helped position him early on as the avatar of a new generation of poets, heralding a new kind of engagement with their times. We can see the way that Auden's interest in psychology marked his work with the stamp of newness and vitality in the early thirties: the poem "To ask the hard question is simple" appeared in the July 1933 edition of *The Criterion*, which has for its leading piece an essay by Thomas Mann, "Freud's Position in the History of Modern Thought".⁹⁰ The riddling tone of the poem, its ambulatory cadences that swing between the conversational and the declarative, and its apparent preoccupation with the failures and frustrations of communication, seem to be contiguous with this intellectual setting while resisting ready explanation:

To ask the hard question is simple;
Asking at meeting
With the simple glance of acquaintance
To what these go
And how these do:
To ask the hard question is simple,
The simple act of the confused will.

The English Auden, 54-55.

Auden's work seemed to invite the code-breaking mentality – the reconstructive, instrumental approach to reading – from his very first successes. His talent helped inaugurate a cultural trend in which poetry became the target for sociological projections, a development which in the minds of many commentators encouraged direct equations between art and politics. This cultural ambience is demonstrated in an earlier issue of the same journal, featuring an essay by A. L. Morton, "Poetry and Property in a Communist Society", in which Morton argues that modern poets are duty bound to situate themselves as "close to production" as possible.⁹¹ But it would be incautious to ascribe this emergent cultural situation to Auden's work wholesale. The pertinent questions are: What kind of thinking did Auden make possible within that situation, and how and what did his work crystallise? It is clear that Auden's poetry was taken as exemplary in its time of emergence, such that, for a significant period, he seemed to define the modern. The element of warning that frequently recurs in his early work - comprising the bass note of the nascent Audenesque –

⁹⁰ *The Criterion*, July 1933 (London: Faber and Faber), 560-568.

⁹¹ *The Criterion*, October 1932 (London: Faber and Faber), 51-54.

seems to invite partisanship, as in “The strings’ excitement, the applauding drum” (April 1929):

Yet there’s no peace in this assaulted city
But speeches at the corners, hope for news,
Outside the watchfires of a stronger army.
The English Auden, 32.

Lines are being drawn, and as Louis MacNeice would put it later, sides could be taken.⁹² Even while we have to guard against incaution, the effect of Auden’s unmistakable hybrid of the minatory and the diagnostic was evidently felt as something bordering on clairvoyance, as Charles Madge’s encomium “Letter to the Intelligentsia” suggested in 1932:

But there waited for me in the summer morning,
Auden, fiercely. I read, shuddered and knew
And all the world’s stationary things
In silence moved to take up new positions;⁹³

Madge’s image of the newly mobile “stationary things” attests to Auden’s power to alter the dimensions of thought: this was a poetry capable of a different order of mimesis (in the Aristotelian sense), representing things not as they had been, but as they were becoming. The same year saw the publication of Michael Roberts’s *New Signatures*, in which poetry was heralded as a potential “resolution of our own problems”.⁹⁴ In this sense it is evident that Auden very literally helped create the terms of his own reception, to recall Timothy Clark’s point.⁹⁵ The curious blend of opacity and urgency that characterises the “atmosphere”⁹⁶ of the Audenesque is itself a conditioning factor for thirties literary debate about the potential of poetry to transgress its status as an aesthetic object. Spender’s *The Destructive Element*

⁹² Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), 15.

⁹³ *New Country: Prose and Poetry by the Authors of New Signatures*, ed. Michael Roberts (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), 231-2.

⁹⁴ *New Signatures: Poems by Several Hands*, ed. Michael Roberts (London: Hogarth Press, 1932), 7.

⁹⁵ Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity*, 53.

⁹⁶ Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995) 6: “Nounness, verbness, adjectiveness, and adverbness are all “atmospheres” which help give poems their characteristic “weather”,...”

frequently makes implicit reference to Auden, often borrowing phrases from his friend's poetry to bolster his points:

The Socialist artist is concerned with realizing in his own work the ideas of a classless society: that is to say, applying those ideas to the life around him, and giving them their reality. He is concerned with a change of heart.⁹⁷

The interpolation of the concluding words of Auden's "Sir, no man's enemy" is hard to miss. However speculative the overall tone of these interventions, they signify a crucial point: talk of poetry as the possible resolution of problems (or the realization of the ideas of a classless society) suggests that the separation between the aesthetic experience and the material events of history is open to question. These points are crucial to explaining Auden's significance to his peers and his continued power to stage for the reader the singular lyric experience.

More specifically, the question underscoring bold claims such as those made by Morton and Roberts is: What is the nature of the poem's powers of affect? This is the ever-present concern that the experience of reading Auden's poetry raises for us in the present day; it is occasionally the subject of the poems themselves. It soon became the leitmotif of thirties criticism in various guises. It also dictates the course of Auden criticism beyond the thirties; the challenges presented by the poetry are often met by recounting Auden's promiscuous intellectual tastes. Thus the orthodoxy of developmental, ideational criticism (seemingly invited by Auden) locates the final referent for his poetry in the systems of thought that are said to sustain it. Justin Replogle argues:

Freud, Marx, and Kierkegaard all belong to the same philosophical tradition, and Auden's entire intellectual development, in a general way, takes place within it – within the tradition of post-Hegelian Germanic thought.⁹⁸

There is nothing false in this assertion. Indeed, the role of Heidegger and Adorno in this thesis, for example, testifies to the perspicacity of Replogle's observation. But the

⁹⁷ Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), 228.

⁹⁸ Justin Replogle, *Auden's Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1969), 6.

consequence of adopting the purely ideational approach is that our interpretation is canalised, possibly suspending our experience of reading. The difficulty of Auden's earliest work sets the agenda for most subsequent Auden criticism because, in its apparently programmatic trickiness, his work suggests that the poet is presenting ideas in the form of poetry, an emphasis which Replogle for one takes as the cue to uncover "the smooth unbroken line" of Auden's intellectual development.⁹⁹ The discrete encounter with the poem is taken for granted; notwithstanding Replogle's many subtle insights, in his account the poetry is condensed and narrated in order to conform to his thesis. Such is the result of any sustained attempt to describe Auden's poetry over the span of his career, and this is without doubt highly valuable. But there is a case to be made for repositioning Auden criticism away from the ideational and towards the experiential. This will not mean that the systems of thought, the intellectual frames and modes Auden draws upon in a given poem, can be cast aside. It means instead that their role in generating the power of the poem should be described as it happens. My move is to restore to Auden's work the intensity of the first encounter alongside scholarly principles of analysis.

Auden occupies a central role in many critical accounts of the thirties. Works such as Valentine Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties* and Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* successfully narrate Auden's prominence among the emergent thirties writers.¹⁰⁰ Both works lucidly describe the functioning of the Auden group and its relation to the literary family trees of modernism, perhaps to the neglect of the wider European philosophical debates about the nature of modernity among which Auden's poetry ought to also be positioned. Recent critical volumes focusing on the thirties have tended to neglect Auden, perhaps wary of the prominence he enjoys.¹⁰¹ Edward Mendelson has written the canonical study, *Early Auden*, using an approach which merges biography with criticism to achieve an invaluable full account of the myriad tributary streams that lead into Auden's work.¹⁰² Along with John Fuller's *W. H.*

⁹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁰ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in the 1930s* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

¹⁰¹ Neither Patrick Quinn, ed. *Recharting the Thirties* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996) or Anthony Shuttleworth, ed. *And in Our Time: Vision, Revision and British Writing of the 1930s* (London: Associated Presses, 2003) find place for Auden in their accounts.

¹⁰² Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).

Auden: A Commentary, it stands as an indispensable resource for Auden studies. Fuller's comprehensive account of the genesis of each Auden poem, its intellectual and biographical sources, and its place within the wider shape of the poet's career, typify the reconstructive method.¹⁰³ This approach proceeds from Auden's renowned difficulty, as Fuller states in his foreword:

Auden is a poet who after about 1932 began in an almost programmatic way to turn his back on the obscurity and formal freedom and experimentation of modernism. Indeed, he is nowadays sometimes seen as our first postmodernist poet. This does not mean, however, that he did not continue to be a difficult poet. Poetry is an art which has always exploited and will continue to exploit difficulty and verbal deviousness, and every interested reader is in a sense his or her own commentator who will now and again need a little help.¹⁰⁴

While the Herculean labour of gathering and piecing together the materials of Auden's work is undertaken by Fuller with exceptional energy, there is a danger that, following his example, we answer the difficulty of the poetry in an exclusively referential way, and that difficulty per sé becomes the byword for all of Auden's output. Fuller's accounts are invariably accessible and lucid, and I will refer to his insights in close reading, but I pursue another line of difficulty which prioritises our encounter with Auden's poetics, seeking to describe the experience of difficult work and to consider the importance of other modes in which he wrote. This will obviously work in tandem with secondary material such as Fuller's. Fuller is surely right to say that readers of Auden often feel bereft, but this feeling is crucial in determining what makes Auden such a powerful poet, or, put differently, why we can discuss his singularity. Mendelson's close attention to Auden's journals, to his habits, his whereabouts and his public and private lives also produces a masterpiece of reconstruction which is difficult to fault. His sensitivity as a reader of Auden's poetry is beyond question and I will also look to his insights frequently, but again, the issue is one of emphasis. It is not in the nature of Mendelson's project to elaborate on his particular experience of reading Auden; Mendelson's experience, it seems, is generalised into *the* experience, as soon as it is squared with the concrete detail of Auden's life. For example:

¹⁰³ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

At twenty Auden was young enough to hope that the passage of time would suffice to end his isolation. Two years later, as his loneliness persisted, he sought a more drastic and deliberate means of change. He faced his difficulties as a healer would – tracing causes and experimenting with cures. He saw man's inner pain as a consequence of evolution: mind had been evolved from body, and their divergence had now reached the point of crisis. Yet the mind, Auden argued, had also evolved to the point where, unlike its evolutionary predecessors, it could choose to end its pain by choosing the next stage in its development.¹⁰⁵

Barbara Everett has voiced a number of salutary remarks on this point, taking issue with the underlying notion in Mendelson's work that Auden invariably chose his material and his style in a premeditated, rational way. She also articulates something that the experience of reading Auden makes manifest:

...it is this very un-self-questioning trust in "impersonality" [found in Mendelson and in Auden's biographer Humphrey Carpenter] that proves most self-limiting, least flexible in practice. Perhaps no scholarly essay is safely embarked on without some belief in the indeterminacy principle, or the fact that a recorder by recording invariably alters what he sees.¹⁰⁶

Close readings are predicated upon this indeterminacy principle; my framework for describing Auden's lyric poetry will be based upon how his poetics encourage us to alter what we see, and how we can describe this mutual process in terms of speaking the poetry. Everett considers the accounts of Auden's creative methods (such as that given by Christopher Isherwood in "Some Notes on Auden's Early Poetry")¹⁰⁷ that attest to nothing so much as his total lack of premeditation when writing. What she calls Auden's "profound irrationality"¹⁰⁸ when composing often chimes with our experience of reading him, which is in a sense pitched against all notions of narrated intellectual development:

Sentries against inner and outer,

¹⁰⁵ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 65.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 214.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Isherwood, *Exhumations* (London: Methuen, 1966), 32. "When Auden was younger, he was very lazy. He hated polishing and making corrections. If I didn't like a poem, he threw it away and wrote another. If I liked one line, he would keep it and work it into a new poem. In this way, whole poems were constructed which were simply anthologies of my favourite lines, entirely regardless of grammar or sense. This is the simple explanation of much of Auden's celebrated obscurity." While this account is an amusing rejoinder to notions of Auden's premeditated methods, it would be wrong to take it as sacrosanct and construct a "law of the random" approach to his work based on such testimony.

¹⁰⁸ Everett, *Poets in Their Time*, 221.

At stated interval is feature;
And how shall enemy on these
Make sudden raid or lasting peace?
The English Auden, 33.

As soon as we attempt to reconstruct the sense of such lines as these, we are moving away from the quiddity of our response; Auden's work often makes us uneasily aware that when we formulate our response into words, we step out of the lyrical atmosphere into a safer, neutral space. This is the unavoidable consequence of any attempt at criticism, but Auden makes it hard to dismiss. We understand that the best approach for the critic in light of this is to retain a sense of such quiddity as far as possible when seeking to position the work in a wider historical or cultural context. In other respects Mendelson offers a useful point of departure for the experiential approach with his occasional descriptions of the effect of the early Audenesque on the reader:

The poems suggest that they are fragments of a larger whole but do not provide enough data to identify that whole. The reader is made to feel that some vital clue is lacking which, if one had it, could make sense of everything. But Auden hid nothing. The absence of a clue is the clue itself. The poems' central subject is their own failure to be part of any larger interpretive frame.¹⁰⁹

It is this fragmentary quality which, rather than being the index of a wider absence or lack, secures these poems for me as species of lyric. The fragmentary quality of those lines from "Sentries against inner and outer", for example, is owing to their extreme compression, or, to their dense concatenation of thought which finds its "reality effect" through a lexicon of conflict which combines with the distinctive, punctured syntax. When we move from the textual to read these lines aloud, their uncanny fluency strikes us almost as an affront to the trouble we have in reconstructing their literal meaning. We might say generally that this characterises what happens when we read the early Audenesque aloud, but, during such reading, our attention is aimed squarely at the self-contained fullness of the lyric in question. So where Mendelson is put in mind of a possible overarching narrative sweep unifying the discrete poems (as if each were a part of a dislocated tapestry such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos*), I would argue that there is limited critical capital here. Instead the fragmentariness, which comprises so much of the force of the early Audenesque, indicates that the poem is a modern lyric: that it stands alone, irrespective of the

¹⁰⁹ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 10.

thematic continuities or similarities it may have with other works. That these poems are not “part of any larger interpretive frame” is not their central subject, but is rather their central manner of address, that is, as discrete moments of speech. If we see the poems from the standpoint of lyric concepts and features then, as acts of utterance, it seems premature to charge them with a failure to be part of a larger interpretive frame. Again, Mendelson’s assumption of Auden’s systematic policy toward composing leads him into broad characterisations that may divert us from the nature of the individual poem at hand.

This prompts the question, why is the Audenesque best explained as an aspect of lyric? Furthermore, on what grounds can we call Auden a lyric poet first and foremost? I have said that, in my view, the key term in understanding lyric is proximity, connected to vocality. In Auden’s lyric, this proximity has manifold sources. What we encounter so often in Auden’s early pieces is the speaking voice emphasising its place and its time – the moment of its utterance:

Upon this line between adventure
Prolong the meeting out of good nature
Obvious in each agreeable feature.
The English Auden, 32.

Or,

This lunar beauty
Has no history
Is complete and early;
The English Auden, 52.

This can equally apply when the subject matter of the poem is not conventionally lyrical:

Look there! The sunk road winding
To the fortified farm.
Listen! The cock’s alarm
In the strange valley.
The English Auden, 56.

It is this emphasis on temporality and setting, combined with the supple music of Auden's lines, which frequently evokes the speaking lyric voice.¹¹⁰ The urgency of the poetry resides here, in the sense that the poem is being addressed to us when, as Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves suggest, we can only conjecture as to what end:

The authoritative air, typical of the early poetry, comes not only from the speaker's superior viewpoint..., but also from the commanding voice. But it *is* only an air, of not one in command but who would command.¹¹¹

O'Neill and Reeves (whose approach benefits from close attention to textual detail and the treatment of the poems as separate entities) also locate the power of the Audenesque in "its awareness of itself as an act of utterance".¹¹² I would concur with this, and add that the awareness confirms Auden's speakers as lyric speakers. This temporality in the Audenesque counterbalances the distance and the element of detached, purely rational cognition that the difficulty of his work often prompts, the same element that mitigates looking to his work on the basis of a false, uncritical immediacy. Hence there is a crucial union of our responsive tendencies at the heart of the experience of reading Auden - one that revolves around the tension between the critical and the temporal senses evoked in the reader - which is that the conceptual and the intuitive faculties are prompted in tandem. The result is the proximal sense.

When we seek to situate this proximity historically, the essential point to remember is that, using lyric modes and techniques, Auden's speakers project their utterances outwards – to the public realm – within which the reader stands. In this sense our experience of Auden's poetry is only occasionally that of conventional lyrical retreat into the subjective, and in any case we will see that Auden's love lyrics negotiate this retreat in unconventional ways. Auden's lyric hence performs a timely self-redefinition. It has become a mode of public speaking. Anthony Hecht's view of

¹¹⁰ Chris Baldick identifies the role of voice as one of the distinguishing features of "the modernity of modern English verse": "The modern element resides rather in an extended range of diction and of "unpoetical" subject matter, in a deliberate avoidance of "Victorian" moralizing and ornate poeticism, and in less tangible qualities such as tone, attitude, mood, and authorial "voice". *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 10. 1910-1940: The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 79.

¹¹¹ Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 8.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

Auden takes account of this, but I would contend that he does not consider how Auden's innovation specifically relates to lyric:

...from the very first Auden had two identifiable styles in operation, two styles which sometimes he was able to merge into a third and hybrid one, no less successful for its mongrel nature than its interesting parents.¹¹³

Hecht classifies these styles firstly as the most personal, often a love poem which provides "the use of intimacy as a pretext for public and observed behaviour",¹¹⁴ or elsewhere "an intimate mode of dramatic speech";¹¹⁵ secondly he sees its fully public counterpart, which he defines by its relation to song; thirdly he sees a fusion of these two modes. In Chapter Six I will discuss how Hecht's understanding of Auden's song does not go far enough in explicating the importance of music to the later thirties work. Again, Hecht's taxonomy here is entirely accurate and his readings of individual poems are astute, but by neglecting to discuss the altered gravity of reading a poem existing between the public and the private modes – in other words, by neglecting to interrogate the nature of the new lyric voice and its significance to early twentieth century modernity – Hecht misses an opportunity to account for Auden's power. The intimacy (that is, the lyric intimacy) is not simply a "pretext" for "public and observed behaviour"; the relationship between public and private in the voicing of Auden's lyric is rather the measure of an emergent way of thinking. It is historical in the Heideggerian sense of being "truth-creating", and once again, the element of speaking patterned into the lyric form ought not to be neglected.

Much of the confusion surrounding Auden's relationship to history is generated here, in the voice that speaks the language of public and private at once, and so, it would seem, has no historically assured position. Patrick Deane has recently written:

¹¹³ Anthony Hecht, *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993) 12.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

His [Auden's] early poems are set in a world suffused with threat and mysterious urgency, yet oddly detached from history, and are in that sense mythic.¹¹⁶

The detachment that Deane notices need not be explained solely in terms of the self-generated mythology of abandoned mines, border crossings and apocalyptic countdowns that lend the Audenesque its stark visuality. The detachment is a manifestation of the voicing of the poem as modern lyric, which merges public speaking with private. The detachment (I would call it objectivity, following Adorno) is not a retreat from history: on the contrary it is the stamp of true historicity. We ought to be clear about the nature of Auden's historicity here. In an excellent essay on Auden's language and style, Peter Porter argues:

Auden gives no credence to the idea that form must be governed historically, or should spring mysteriously but inevitably from contemporary necessities. He was sceptical that "the age demanded" any style just because it *was* the age.¹¹⁷

Porter is considering Auden's status as "the great reviver of past disciplines within modern times."¹¹⁸ And this is clearly correct: Auden's experimentation with form argues against a doctrinaire Marxist prescription of what is historical and what is not. But the voice behind the form, whichever form it may be, can be understood as historically specific in a way that is not reductive, because it is a voice that has intuited (rather than meditated upon and then chosen to convey, as Mendelson would have it) the conditions of selfhood in the early twentieth century. Porter puts it thus: "Consciousness of history is instinctive and needs no special imperative."¹¹⁹ With this notion of instinctive lyric voicing in mind, then, we could trace an alternative arc of Auden's development, one that takes an immanent view of the poetry. This arc is not based on the ideas or intellectual structures informing the lyrics, but on the way in which each lyric might use those ideas to configure the act of speaking outwards, to the public realm. My chapters will take this as their guiding premise as I look at different contexts for Auden's lyric voice. We will then see that the significance of

¹¹⁶ Patrick Deane, "Auden's Britain", *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25.

¹¹⁷ Peter Porter, "Auden's English: language and style", *ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

Auden's achievement in the thirties, and the reason for the continued power of his lyric address, lies in this voice.

How can the Audenesque involve a sense of public speaking when it is famously introverted? Clearly such a general way of approaching this question is flawed. A poem such as "Get there if you can", which I will examine in more detail in a later chapter, is avowedly outward-facing, a call to live differently or face the cost:

Shut up talking, charming in the best suits to be had in town,
Lecturing on navigation while the ship is going down.

Drop those priggish ways for ever, stop behaving like a stone:
Throw the bath-chairs right away, and learn to leave ourselves alone.

If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try;
If we don't it doesn't matter, but we'd better start to die.
The English Auden, 49.

In works such as these, Auden achieves a grade of lyric presence in the speaking voice through the force of style, by inventing his own accusatory rhetoric. This is evidently not the voice of the poetic "soul", stripped of its social and biological features; instead it becomes proximate by gesturing towards modes of mass communication (the clear command, the speedy overturn of images), such that the poem's style is foremost in our response, actually overshadowing the polemic to a significant degree. In this sense the poem is saturated by the public realm. It crystallises the attempt to communicate a sentiment in general terms, to the extent that the voice becomes pure verbal performance, detached from any conventional lyric roots (for instance in Hamburger's "statement-subject", or from Vendler's privileged interiority). The Audenesque is a contrary term, then. It encompasses the difficulty of engaging with language markedly removed from the normal avenues of poetic communication; it also pertains to the explicit, the urgent, and the declarative, underscored by a particularity of circumstance both temporal and geographical. A closer look at some of the early work can help us to describe the range of the Audenesque along these lines. His earliest poems are notable for the quality of their address, in which the reader's relationship to the material is complicated and made central, for instance in "Who stands, the crux left of the watershed" (August 1927):

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,
On the wet road between the chafing grass
Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,
Snatches of tramline running to the wood,
An industry already comatose,
Yet sparsely living....

The English Auden, 22.

The subject of these lines – the “him” who is standing and seeing – is introduced quasi-hypothetically. It is speaker and reader alike, and yet it is neither. But only because of this confusion does the accumulated lucidity of the adjectives (“wet road”, “chafing grass”, “dismantled washing-floors”, “industry already comatose”) acquire its power. The moment of the poem unfolds as a visual account of the blasted landscape; the human acts which lie behind the detritus are only intimated (“many dead / Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen / Taken from recent winters;”), in a way that seems to be caught in a loop of feedback with the hypothetical subject of the address. This gestalt voice then becomes imperative, to our surprise:

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
This land, cut off, will not communicate,
Be no accessory content to one
Aimless for faces rather there than here.

It is the move from the quasi-hypothetical to the imperative which implicates the reader most forcibly, yet still unaccountably. The commands given to the reader are obfuscated other than the one to leave this scene, and they barely submit themselves to paraphrase. So the return of the hypothetical mode at the denouement of the poem furthers the sense that we are being mocked as much as warned, but the stakes of our misunderstanding and confusion are palpably high:

...; you may hear the wind
Arriving driven from the ignorant sea
To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm
Where sap unbaffled rises, being Spring;
But seldom this. Near you, taller than grass,
Ears poise before decision, scenting danger.

There is apparently no sanctuary, no reassurance or fixities of meaning to be found in the symbolism of nature, where the sea is “ignorant” and the wind arrives “to hurt itself on pane”. What, then, is the effect of this voice? Its insistence on the time and place of its utterance, the vocative, and the surety with which it marshals our confusion as it speaks all conspire to identify this poem as a lyric of sorts, albeit one that is moved to question the habitually assumed correspondence between man and his natural surroundings. “Who stands...” establishes Auden’s grasp of this paradox which comes to define how we read his difficult pieces: we are proximate to the material of the poem (that is, the poem expresses in a new language how we think, what we see and how we feel) but inexplicably so. But, when we ourselves speak the poem, we intuitively understand that it is the voice that instates this proximity, with its sense of movement across modes and registers and its sense of purpose manifest but only dimly communicated. The vocative is the key. The poem is less about who is speaking than who is being spoken to, so when we ourselves inhabit the voice of the accuser and recite the poem, the effect is disorientating. At this point, we are addressing an essentially conjectural subject, at once hypothetical and the subject of a command; this is experienced as a form of veiled self-accusation. Yet for all the confusion, when we speak the meaning is conveyed intuitively; there is no middle ground upon which the self might gather its bearings; the self is subjugated entirely to its external surroundings, which persist in concealing themselves.

This explains the historicity of the poem. “Who stands” is an introverted way of speaking outwards, to material history and to the reality of the empirical world. Whatever the “danger” scented, it applies to speaker and speaking-reader in a very real way. In works such as “Since you are going to begin to-day” (November 1929) the vocative force of the Audenesque seizes control of the poem tyrannically, fixing the reader as an interchangeable addressee – a captive audience for the voice of evolutionary, historical and psychological determinism:

Nor even is despair your own, when swiftly
Comes general assault on your ideas of safety:
That sense of famine, central anguish felt
For goodness wasted at peripheral fault,
Your shutting up the house and taking prow
To go into the wilderness to pray,
Means that I wish to leave and to pass on,

Select another form, perhaps your son;...
The English Auden, 45.

It is a technique demonstrably informed by lyric practice, but almost by inverse. Our response is restricted: there is no suggestion of privileged interiority. Rather, the style of address and argument attack the belief, intrinsic to lyric, that we encounter the work provisionally, at a certain time and in a certain mindset. It is a poem against the particular. The essential freedom in interpretation arising from the provisional has been cast aside here: the voice has second-guessed our circumstances. There is only the time determined by the voice, in which we are captive: we must listen, and endure the harangue. We recall Northrop Frye's stipulation about the resistance of lyric to the didactic; Auden has seen fit to revive it, producing here a kind of anti-lyric fed by the dramatic monologue, and predicated on the unsettling feeling that our sensibility can be pre-empted and rendered immobile. But the power of the voice itself, as much as the elaborate psycho-social history relayed, lingers in our reaction to the poem.

This redoubled proximal effect, so evidently integral to the Audenesque, leads me to disagree with the characterisation of poetry Stan Smith applies to the early work:

The poem is a "pseudo-person", in fact no more than a play of language, a "game" or "contraption". Thus every text is a double field, and its doubleness is compounded by the fact that it is *my* experience – an experience of pleasure, satisfaction, delight – at the moment that *I* impute its contents to the subjectivity of *another* – the pseudo "*I*" who supposedly speaks. This other who addresses me, "person to person", is my own reflection, as reader, speaking back to me out of the mirror of another man's words.¹²⁰

Smith's application of the term "pseudo-person" is apparently drawn from Auden's later essay, "The Virgin and the Dynamo".¹²¹ But this account of the vocality of Auden's work ignores the speaking aspect of lyric in favour of an Althusserian theoretical edict which, I feel, does not always accord to the poetry, though it

¹²⁰ Stan Smith, *W. H. Auden* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) 5.

¹²¹ Auden, "The Virgin and the Dynamo", *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 68.

undoubtedly opens many rewarding new avenues for interpretation.¹²² The centrality of the lyric voice to Auden's work and its relationship to historical reality do not sanction the view that the poem is "no more than a play of language", principally concerned with its own "doubleness". When I read the text I do not impute its contents to the subjectivity of another: such an imputation is unnecessary. Heidegger's view is instructive here. It is given that the lyric presents (not artifices) a human speaking voice, and reading Auden provides me with nothing like my own reflection, even when, as with "Who stands", it seems to describe the quiddity of my thought process. This would be to neuter the poetry: to deny its possibility to alter my thinking, a possibility arising from the fact that the lyric is a co-production between two voices – the lyric's and my own – each with their discrete circumstances of history and preferences. Without due respect for the way that my actual speaking is induced by the lyric and implicated in its meaning, we limit the potential of the work.

Rainer Emig has recently pursued a similar course to Smith, claiming Auden as a proto-postmodernist.¹²³ Emig contends that Auden's early poetry waves "farewell to the signified":

Auden's early works...actually multiply the absence of natural relations and identification while simultaneously stressing the problematic entanglement of language and community....They reverse the traditional hierarchies of realism and mimesis according to which texts use certain mechanisms to mirror an external reality.¹²⁴

Emig is surely correct in his concern, like Smith, to avoid retelling the story of Auden's changing beliefs and philosophies, the method inaugurated by Randall Jarrell in his (famously rancorous) reviews of the thirties and forties,¹²⁵ continued by such influential critics as Monroe K. Spears¹²⁶ and by contemporary readers such as Alan Jacobs.¹²⁷ But Smith and Emig are in effect also continuing this critical trend:

¹²² Smith (20) builds upon Althusser's notion of "interpellation", that is, the "constitution of the subject in discourse", in his study.

¹²³ Rainer Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹²⁵ Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden & Co: Essays and Reviews, 1935-1964* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1981), 36-37; 55-57; 145-146.

¹²⁶ Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

¹²⁷ Alan Jacobs, *What Became of Wylan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998).

linguistic self-reference stands as the abiding concern of Auden's poetics, in the place of Freudianism, Marxism or Pauline theology. When Smith argues that the play of language in Auden equates to "a perpetually deferred and imaginary subject" who would be his "ideal reader" he has clearly departed from the experience of reading to an untenable degree.¹²⁸ The poetry does not encourage the fiction of a deferred ideal reader: the lyric voice addresses us, as we are. We recall that Heidegger insists on the materiality of the artwork, and that our experience of art is predicated upon seeing this materiality afresh.¹²⁹ Smith's and Emig's understanding of the materiality of poetry is confined to language as it appears on the page; their accounts neglect to consider that speaking is a fundamental aspect of the materiality of poetic language, and that, far from representing an investment in false immediacy, when we heighten the role of voice in the lyric by speaking ourselves we are prompted to sharpen our contextual response to the work. As we have seen, this sharpening can be described temporally. We have already experienced the intriguing delay-effect arising from the interplay between the intuitive (spoken) response to the work and the conceptual (textual), at its most acute in works such as "Sentries against inner and outer". So, in its relationship with the conceptual, the quality of immediacy in Auden – when it is understood as affined to our own speaking - actually increases our appreciation of the manner of thinking which characterised twentieth century modernity. Smith's and Emig's wariness of immediacy echoes Adorno, but it is the false separation of the immediate and the conceptual with which Adorno takes issue, not the immediate *qua* category.¹³⁰ Furthermore Adorno's unstinting insistence on form might be said to properly apply to the lyric poem in an extra-textual way: the voice of the poem coheres best through contact with our own recitation (which is never passive or unquestioning).

Time and again Auden insisted upon speech in his critical work, and although we should not view this as a cast-iron prescription for his poetry we should endeavour to recognise the importance of speaking and to think it through in more depth:

¹²⁸ Smith, *W. H. Auden*, 5-6.

¹²⁹ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", 146.

¹³⁰ Adorno's observation on the flaws of Positivism in his first post-war work *Minima Moralia* (1974; repr., London: Verso: 2005) expresses the importance of the immediate: "...to deprive thought of the moment of spontaneity is to annul precisely its necessity." (124) This point prefigures the recurrent argument of *Aesthetic Theory* regarding the danger of separating the immediate and the conceptual (the danger being that we repeat the mechanisms of identity thinking).

Of the many definitions of poetry, the simplest is still the best: “memorable speech”. That is to say, it must move our emotions, or excite our intellect, for only that which is moving or exciting is memorable, and the stimulus is the audible spoken word and cadence, to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender, as we do when talking to an intimate friend.¹³¹

Aside from his thoughts as a critic, Auden’s lyric modes also continually allude to the notion that the materiality of poetry implies speaking, as his love of the vocative in the early thirties work, and the rhetorical opposition between competing voices in the later, both demonstrate. This emphasis on the voice, in manifold guises, does not have to equate to a post-structural argument concerning the workings of the referential system. Thus I disagree with Emig’s contention that there is an essential reversal at place in Auden’s work whereby language takes precedent over the material world that it describes. As “Get there if you can” and “Who stands” both illustrate, the lyric voice certainly does dominate our reaction to the poem, but this is not the same thing. The voice is in a direct relationship with the referent, that is, with the empirical reality that conditions its speaking. In this sense my approach is closer in spirit to those of Gregory Woods and Richard R. Bozorth, who respond to the code-breaking difficulty, the language games and private, coterie references in Auden’s work by considering his sexuality.¹³² Rather than being primarily concerned with linguistic self-reference and the problem of the signifier, Auden’s poetry is, they contend, always closely related to the reality of his life as a homosexual in the twenties and thirties. There is clearly an attractive explanation for Auden’s difficulty here, and Bozorth’s suspicion toward the notion that all Auden’s poetry can be said to transcend personal circumstance is a valid one, attested by much of the material of his work (such as the recurring motif of “us” and “them”, “us” being Auden’s distinguished group of friends). Bozorth’s description of what happens when we read (by proxy) is also especially resonant, and apparently proceeds from the afore-quoted words of the poet himself:

...Auden came to treat poetry itself as a kind of lovers’ discourse: a site of intimate relation between poet and reader in all their particularities.¹³³

¹³¹ Taken from the “Introduction to *The Poet’s Tongue*”, *The English Auden*, 327.

¹³² Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-Eroticism and Modern Poetry* (London: Yale, 1987); Richard R. Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

¹³³ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 175.

Over the course of this thesis a similar theory will emerge, but I do not describe the experience of reading Auden, as Bozorth does, as a kind of hypothetical seduction, (although his work on love lyric certainly convinces in this respect). A broader use of the term lyric should be sought, one that applies to other, less obviously lyrical aspects and tendencies. Woods's and Bozorth's methods are also overtly biographical by definition; as I have said, this would not befit a study that seeks to describe the singularity of Auden.

The critical accounts of Auden's difficulty that favour linguistic self-reference and personal biography give only a partial explanation of what happens when we read, and present an attenuated version of the relationship of this difficulty to history. Certain techniques which define the early Audenesque help to convey this. The oft-remarked omission of articles also serves to hypothesise the situation described by the speakers, even as they insist on the particularity of their moment:

It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens
Hearing the frogs exhaling from the pond,
Watching traffic of magnificent cloud
Moving without anxiety on open sky –
Season when lovers and writers find
An altering speech for altering things,
An emphasis on new names, on the arm
A fresh hand with fresh power.
But thinking so I came at once
Where solitary man sat weeping on a bench,
Hanging his head down, with his mouth distorted
Helpless and ugly as an embryo chicken.

The English Auden, 37.

This technique is at its most effective when used sparingly, as here. The voice is appreciably conversational for the most part, but it is placed at a remove by such formulations as “on open sky”, “traffic of magnificent cloud” and “Where solitary man sat”. Such a remove, however, serves the purpose of proximity. If it is the case, as Mendelson, Smith and Emig all suggest, that the early work is chiefly self-referring, self-concerned and resistant to the accustomed dynamic of reality and representation we find in the conventional understanding of Aristotelian mimesis, then this is surely offset by the note of accessibility that such techniques as the

omission of articles imply. The technique makes the situation subject to a degree of generalisation, as John Fuller argues:¹³⁴ the speaking voice is insinuating that this event, though experienced in a particular, discrete way, can resonate beyond the remit of a self-generated linguistic construct (a construct that is in any case only made possible by the reality of a voice in a given place and time).

“It was Easter” poses a number of interesting questions regarding the lyric voice. Clearly an extended meditative poem, it is the best example of those poems in Auden’s oeuvre which invite the ideational approach (and Fuller’s rendering is especially convincing). It would be flagrantly false to use lyric as a blanket term applying to all Auden’s poetry come what may, and my selections for close reading generally focus on the shorter pieces, in which compression is felt to induce the reader’s speech. Yet longer poems such as this one could also be configured according to this emphasis, as its opening proves. Most importantly, the dynamic of the hybrid sense of public and private speaking is still evinced: but it is put forth with greater urgency in the shorter poems. I do aim, however, to consider the way that the lyric voice is present and operative in other areas, as well as in those works which, according to convention, can be described as abstract, interior, and musical. There is a path to be forged between the modern critical usage of the term lyric and its forebears:

...in modern critical usage it may be said that lyric is a general, categorical, and nominal term, whereas in the pre-Renaissance sense it was specific, generic and descriptive. In its modern meaning, a lyric is a type of poetry which is mechanically representational of a musical architecture and which is thematically representational of a poet’s sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception and image. In its older and more restrictive sense, a lyric was simply a poem written to be sung.¹³⁵

Musical architecture, I contend, goes beyond the readily identifiable features of poetics (rhyme, meter) and obtains in the voice which arranges them. This implies a degree of generality in my approach but we can still employ the term lyric in a more specific, descriptive way. In “It was Easter” the lyric voice is heard as the medium with which to negotiate the fraught passages between the inner life and the outer.

¹³⁴ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 61.

¹³⁵ Definition given in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 3rd Edition, 1993), 715.

Here the momentum gathered by the repeated gerund falters into chiasmus, establishing the note of introverted frustration in the speaker's self-conception:

Coming out of me living is always thinking,
Thinking changing and changing living,
Am feeling as it was seeing -

The lyric voice supplements the meditative structure of the poem then, allowing the speaker's thoughts on political life to converge with the frustrations of an apparently isolated subjectivity:

All this time was anxiety at night
Shooting and barricade in street.
Walking home late I listened to a friend
Talking excitedly of final war
Of proletariat against police –
That one shot girl of nineteen through the knees,
They threw that one down concrete stair –
Til I was angry, said I was pleased.

The English Auden, 38.

The longer, meditative framework means that topical elements of reportage such as this can be contextualised with Auden's ideas about the development of the self. But the approach to Auden's work through lyric is most rewarding when Auden himself, as it were, does not take centre stage. I will discuss the conditioning cultural background to such egoist poems ("The month was April", Auden's comical Freudian self-allegory written in June 1933, is another example) later in this chapter, but I am more concerned with how other poems depart from the autobiographical and use lyric modes to establish their historicity involving a non-specific "I". The narrative arc of "It was Easter" and the sense of poise created by an extended meditation are achieved at the cost of an urgency which is central to the experience of lyric. Although I do not wish to appraise the poem using unsuitable terminology, in later thirties poems such as "Spain 1937", "September 1st, 1939" and "Musee Des Beaux Arts" we will see Auden applying the lyric voice to a meditative structure, the results of which define moments of collective historical life.

The urgency of the lyric begets an unrivalled insight into the time and place of one's situation within a collective, and this is not a line of enquiry that has been fully explicated according to Auden's professed fascination with the coterie or group.¹³⁶ The collective life is clearly an abiding thematic concern over the course of the thirties, but once more, the lyric voice presents the reality of this situation beneath and beyond its rendering as theme. The tendency to take Auden at his word and to view the poetry on the basis of his stated ideas about individual and collective reaches its limit here. The poetry often presents, through the voice, testimony to an area of experience preceding all theoretical considerations; better, it testifies to the growth of concepts and ideas from that prior experience as they are formed and uttered. This is perceptible as a recurrent feature of the lyric voice, beneath some of Auden's most famous lines, and not confined to particular thematics. For example, the short iambic dimeter of the middle lines of the stanzas that comprise "Look, stranger, on this island now" evokes, by contrast to what comes before and after, a hiatus in which we are made aware of the spontaneous convolutions of real-time thinking:

Look, stranger, on this island now
 The leaping light for your delight discovers,
 Stand stable here
 And silent be,
 That through the channels of the ear
 May wander like a river
 The swaying sound of the sea.

Collected Poems, 130.¹³⁷

The insistence on the time and place of utterance also encourages a new orientation toward the political quality of Auden's work which I will examine in detail in Chapter Five. There is at this stage a clear necessity to loosen the term "political" with regard to Auden: to try to gauge what his poems convey about political life in twentieth century modernity aside from the narrower issues of his own changing allegiances or shifting ideologies.

¹³⁶ *The Orators: An English Study* (1932) encapsulates what Mendelson calls "Auden's negative vision of groups" (*Early Auden*, 116), which encouraged him in turn to find other, positive visions during this period. In *The Orators*, Auden's lyric mode makes frequent appearances: I do not include the piece in this study on account of the separate demands of its experimental narrative structure, which is predominant over individual lyrics.

¹³⁷ Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (1966, New York; repr., London: Faber and Faber, 2004). I examine this revised version because the alteration of "...at this island" to "...on this island" seems to better evoke the contemplative tone of the opening.

The issue of lyric's relation to the collective historical experience is presented with increased clarity when we look at other early Auden poems of the type that Anthony Hecht relates to song: the public Audenesque. I argue that the element of public speaking is present in all poems; the acute awareness that the speaker's utterance is directed to the reader as an actor within the public realm secures the affectivity of the poem using lyrical modes. As a symptom of this, from the beginning of his maturity Auden wrote poems which invite the term lyric in a more conventional generic sense, poems such as "We made all possible preparations" (December 1928) and "It's no use raising a shout" (November 1929), which, however they may invoke lyric convention, point beyond it. In Chapter Four I will look at a number of Auden's lyrics through the prism of light verse; what such lyrics provide here to a discussion of the Audenesque is proof of the importance of clarity in his poetics, as the counterpart to the difficult. Auden's frequent willingness to circumvent anxieties about expression and one's audience – anxieties attendant to all modernist poetry – amounts to more than a simple diversion from weightier matters. The assumption of an audience with common interests, one subject to common historical realities, is vitally important when we consider the way that the work is addressed to a public realm undergoing epochal changes. The primary imperative behind the requirement to review the meaning of lyric, such that it can expand from interiority to include the public mode, is found here. For Auden lyric meant the modern song as well as the traditional poetic form, but the two are predicated on very different situations of voice in relation to subject matter, and on very different art experiences also. The voice that he finds - which Hecht rightly calls a hybrid but does not fully pursue – is hence uniquely privileged to address the reader, the intimacy of singing individual concerns being married to the urgency of the moment in collective life. Hence, "It's no use making a shout":

A bird used to visit this shore:
 It isn't going to come any more.
 I've come a very long way to prove
 No land, no water, and no love.
 Here I am, here are you:
 But what does it mean? What are we going to do?
The English Auden, 43.

The poem covers much the same ground as “It was Easter” and “Since you are going to begin today” but, written as a song with an insistent couplet for a refrain, it secures the speaker’s ironical self-account, with its allegories of psychological and evolutionary paralysis, as more forcibly symptomatic and representative. As readers we are at once part of a collective and clearly individuated: part of the implied mass audience of the modern song, and the privileged recipient of a very private confession. This quality is made absolutely clear in Auden’s light lyrics, but it applies to all of his work, in different, discrete ways. Essentially, then, Auden’s poetics elicit from the reader the recognition of our various modes of self-placement (in both active and passive senses), our various private and public lives. The meaning of the general term Audenesque – by which, at this point, I refer to the speaking voice of lyric that creates a distinctive atmosphere – resides in this scope.

II – The Rise of Society and the Fitness of the Lyric

It seems to be in the nature of the relationship between the public and the private realms that the final stage of the disappearance of the public realm should be accompanied by the threatened liquidation of the private realm as well.

- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*.¹³⁸

Thus far I have claimed that the need to review the significance of the term lyric for Auden’s work hinges upon the element of voice, and upon the complication regarding the standing of the public and private realms in the early twentieth century. I restate at this point that in recounting the original contexts for Auden’s poetry I am not attempting to refer specific examples of his work back into an ideal milieu. The historical is the backdrop to the experiential: the two work in concert as we read, and I intend the structure of the thesis to reflect this as much as possible. In this section Auden will be situated among his contemporaries and it will become clear that his work is conversant with other, philosophical areas of contention. The work of Hannah Arendt will comprise the final pillar supporting my close readings, and will allow us to refine our sense of Auden’s singularity.

¹³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 60-61.

Thus far I have also noted that traditionally the lyric has been configured as the safe-house of subjective expression, marking the time and place in which the self could speak of experiences which had no other means of coming to light in the empirical world – no place in conversation, no fitness for publicity - and no proper shape in other forms of art and other forms of poetry particularly. The interventions of Heidegger and Adorno helped us to understand that this subjective force, a distinguishing aspect of lyric, actually constitutes its objective element, that is, the element that can carry historical significance. For Adorno this process is described as the crystallisation of societal relations, and so takes on an expressly political character once it is articulated by the critic. For Heidegger this process accords to the revelation of Being, where the poet possesses privileged insight into the abiding conditions for thinking at a particular point in the history of Being, and communicates this insight through the lyric. We found it necessary not to elevate these points into unanswerable edicts with regard to Auden, whose work can be said to benefit from such orientations but which must be allowed to determine its own importance. The true nature of Auden's lyric objectivity is best demonstrated when we consider the meaning of the terms public and private for the twenties and thirties. Hannah Arendt's seminal work of 1958, *The Human Condition*, clarifies the historical import of these terms and the way in which they must be properly understood in the context of the early twentieth century. Where I turn to Heidegger and Adorno for their aesthetics, in order to expand our sense of lyric, I turn to Arendt for the most congenial philosophical-historical context, or in order to fully articulate how Auden's work acquired and continues to acquire its meaning. Strictly speaking, the respective ideas on aesthetics of Heidegger and Adorno are inseparable from the overarching shape of their philosophies, and Arendt can be seen as another actor in an ongoing conflict about the nature of modernity. But again, Arendt's ideas are employed so as to keep Auden's poetry central to this thesis. On the basis of Arendt's clarifications we can begin to see how public and private – integral terms to Auden's work – are conjoined in the lyric voice itself, and how this lies behind the redoubled effect of proximity that the voice can instate.

Having received her philosophical education at the feet of Heidegger,¹³⁹ Arendt's ideas are built on the foundation of her teacher's insights and display many of the same intellectual habits; chiefly she examines the ancient Greeks, as the creators of the primal scene of Western intellectual, ethical and political thinking. The section of *The Human Condition* entitled "The *Vita Activa*" is given over to an extended account of the beginnings and subsequent development of the co-dependent arenas of private and public life. Arendt writes that the life of the citizen (as opposed to women and slaves) was lived between the poles of the private, "whose centre is the home (*oikia*) and the family",¹⁴⁰ and the public, which she quotes Aristotle as describing as "a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*."¹⁴¹ The private realm is synonymous with the aspects of human life which relate to necessity: the bodily functions and reproduction. In the private realm, the head of the household occupies an unassailable position: he has in effect the power of the tyrant. By contrast, in the public realm the citizen takes his place as an individual: "...; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were".¹⁴² The public realm is sanctified as the place in which speech and action are the grammar of individuality; in public the citizen has transcended the necessities of biological existence, and has committed his efforts (as an administrator, or an adjudicator for example) to the continuation of a culture which will outlast his own life. By speaking and being heard, and by acting to the ends of his community, the citizen is truly free. In public, Arendt explains, the concept of history becomes possible.¹⁴³

Underpinning Arendt's ideas on the private and public is the tripartite categorisation of human activity into working, producing and action. Work, affined to the private realm, represents man's attachment to the biological life cycle. Rudiger Safranski summarises it thus:

In work, man consumes nature, and in work he uses up his life. No enduring results are produced. Work, strictly speaking, is not "world-creating."¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, 370-382.

¹⁴⁰ Arendt, 24.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 41.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 55: "If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men."

¹⁴⁴ Safranski, *Between Good and Evil*, 382.

In producing, man transcends the harsh necessities of his biological life by making items that cannot be immediately consumed (the influence of Heidegger's thoughts on equipment are clear here). By producing places to inhabit, equipment to use, and also art to reflect upon, man transcends time. It is action, undertaken on the basis of a culture of producing, which is the highest order of human activity. This is because it is the emblem of human freedom. Action, however it may be manifest, is the means by which the inner life finds expression and shape in the collective life; indeed the latter is, as Safranski suggests, the immensely powerful aggregate of the former:

Action is the theatre of the world, and that is why action takes place on the stage that signifies the world – the dramas of love, jealousy, politics, war, talk, education, friendship. Only because they are free can men act. And the multiplicity of intersecting and interweaving action produces the chaos of human reality.¹⁴⁵

Speech and action together comprised the public life of ancient Greece. Arendt explains that the concept of speech implies the reality of difference. Speech is expressible as contention, disagreement, and debate: the processes of locution that are undertaken in the name of enduring human culture. As such, speech – the freedom to speak – is intimately connected with democracy. *The Human Condition* is informed by Arendt's other major work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) in this respect. Arendt is writing in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, with the Cold War at its peak. Mass society, as the most recent stage of "the rise of the social", is Arendt's topic. We will see that Auden's lyric voice of the thirties, pitched as it is between public and private, can illuminate the historical reality of the rise of the social at the point of its apparent implosion.

Arendt explains that the modern age is inaugurated by the rise of the social. Properly understood, society is neither the public realm nor the private. It instead describes their co-evolution into one defining paradigm: an alternative take on Heidegger's *geschichte*, or deep history of Being relations. As distinguished from the thinking of ancient Greece, ancient Rome and the medieval ages, in the modern age the place of privacy is not opposed to the public realm, but to society itself. Arendt

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

posits that society is the effect of the terms of the ancient household taking on a public, generally applicable shape:

The striking coincidence of the rise of society with the decline of the family indicates clearly that what actually took place was the absorption of the family unit into corresponding social groups. The equality of the members of these groups, far from being an equality among peers, resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head, except that in society, where the natural strength of one common interest and one unanimous opinion is tremendously enforced by sheer number, actual rule exerted by one man, representing the common interest and the right opinion, could eventually be dispensed with. The phenomenon of conformism is characteristic of the last stage of this modern development.¹⁴⁶

Privacy has had recourse in the modern age to the sphere of intimacy, first explored by Rousseau and the Romantics.¹⁴⁷ We can confidently surmise that the notion of the lyric as subjective retreat, or better, as the lionisation of the subjective capacity over and against the oppressive influence of the general, the quotidian, or the doctrinaire (equated with the public), stems from this stand taken against society. Arendt herself notes, though admittedly in broad terms, that “The astonishing flowering of poetry and music from the middle of the eighteenth century until almost the last third of the nineteenth,” was an index of this intimacy.¹⁴⁸ The most recent development in the rise of society is the emergence of mass society, as the extension of the monolithic tendency within social conformism. Mass society realises something implicit in all societies:

The monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows for only one interest and one opinion, is ultimately rooted in the one-ness of man-kind.¹⁴⁹

So how might the public realm be said to exist under the terms of mass society? Arendt, it is important to state, does not equate mass society with totalitarian regimes only. Mass society conditions liberal democracy, if that democracy persists in the belief that man is subject to laws of human behaviour. Arendt sees that the definition of a mass society is not expressed in overt coercion or oppression: it is rather in the

¹⁴⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 39.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 46.

scientific, calculating thinking that would make human activity subject to laws and predictions. Behaviour in the modern age is contrasted with action and deed in the ancient; where actions and deeds were the rare events that elucidated the nature of communal life and the historical period, behaviour represents the triumph of the everyday. Behaviour is the instrument of normalisation. The public realm is threatened by the nature of mass society, remembering that Arendt, espousing a democratic ideal, initially defines the public realm in terms of the opposition that it fosters from within as its own lifeblood. We can, however, still talk of an extant public sphere under the terms of mass society because things are still permitted to appear and to be “seen and heard by everybody”.¹⁵⁰ this is the essential difference between liberal democracies and totalitarian tyrannies. Reality is produced (humans are truth-creators, as with Heidegger) by the variance of positions and perspectives; in totalitarian regimes reality is produced monolithically, from the perspective of the party, and all contention is suppressed and extinguished; consequently intimacy must also be extinguished. But one original function of the public sphere is in fact lost to mass society liberal democracies: its ability to clearly define the place of each person as separate from, yet related to, other people. The question to be posed, then, is what happens to the lyric in this situation?

If the public and the private realms have lost their distinctive features as a consequence of society’s colonisation of every aspect of life, where does the lyric find its bearings? Evidently, as with the Romantics, the sphere of intimacy is still viable as a retreat from the travails of the social. This is why, for instance, we can discuss Auden’s love lyrics according to the conventional features of the form. It is also why critics such as William Waters see the crux of lyric, from its ancient beginnings to its modern incarnation, in the “I / You” exchange: lyric is thus a privileged form of intimate contact between poet and reader, where the reader is the addressee.¹⁵¹ This is undoubtedly a vital aspect of reading lyric, and as we have seen already, much of the force of Auden’s work often resides here in his use of the vocative (it certainly helps to characterise the Audenesque as the work of a “prophet-clinician”)¹⁵². But we are still left with the task of discerning the true role of speaking in our encounter with

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 50.

¹⁵¹ Waters, *Poetry’s Touch*, 1-17.

¹⁵² Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, 106.

lyric, and relating how Auden's particular application of the lyric vocative takes effect in different examples. How else does the sense of proximity we encounter in lyric arise, apart from vocative instances when our implication in the poem is explicit? What about instances in which the effect of the lyric upon our understanding it is that the poles of "I / You" do not define our response? Each of the following chapters considers these questions in relation to broad tendencies in Auden's work (love; lightness; politics; song; suffering). Keeping in mind the insistence on voice and the vocal as the guiding forces behind lyric – and noting the tally between Arendt's focus on speech in the public realm and speech's being an aspect of poetry's materiality – there are other avenues than the conventional stance of intimacy open to the lyric poet writing in the twenties and thirties, and to our interpretation (though Auden's adoption of such a stance also merits attention). Essentially Auden's lyric finds its bearings within the manifold attitudes, positions and vantage points that twentieth century modernity makes available, and not simply in the realm of intimacy.

Auden's work effectively creates its own truth, then, by becoming attuned to a sense of communicative possibility as well as communicative restriction. This new note of communicative reach is all too often downplayed by Auden's readers when they focus principally on his awareness of the problems of poetic communication in his age, and then install this as the strongest concern of his early work. Thus Mendelson writes:

Auden's intractable problem in these poems is finally neither erotic nor social nor linguistic, but the irreducible fact of division itself.¹⁵³

At the thematic level alone, this is surely the case as a general description. But theme and voice must not be conflated absolutely here. I would argue that recurring motifs of Auden's poetics, and finally the stance adopted by the voice, are informed by the effects of mass society on the conventional stabilities of public and private expression. In terms of poetic form, one of those effects is the migration of the lyric voice into longer poems, to take its place alongside other, unlyrical modes and registers; also detectable is the concomitant expansion of the scope of smaller poems with a recognisable lyric intensity and temporality. In effect, the mounting confusion

¹⁵³ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 7.

of the public and private realms in twentieth century modernity is being crystallised, from lyric to lyric. This gives rise to a curious sense of license on Auden's part. So division is not the only aspect of a longer poem such as "Consider this and in our time"; instead the poem derives its power from the way in which division is applicable – and expressible – both as a personal matter and a general condition. The famous hawk's-eye view invoked in the opening lines encapsulates the element of the Audenesque not paralysed by anxiety about divided selves and unknowable audiences, but which has a decidedly unhermetic confidence:

Consider this and in our time
As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:
The clouds rift suddenly – look there
At cigarette-end smouldering on a border
At the first garden party of the year.

The English Auden, 46.

In Chapter Five I will discuss the way in which this expressive confidence (which John Bayley, writing about "Get there if you can", argues is central to Auden's style)¹⁵⁴ actively manipulates our response to the poem through its voice. Here, we note that the foreboding tone and the narrative sweep are made possible by the lyric force of a direct vocative address. This, to adopt Arendt's term, is a "social" lyric; it surveys the altered terrain of public and private existence, feeding upon their confusion to instate in our experience a paradoxical sense of *distanced* proximity. Auden's poetics draw us closer as they insist on our distance from the voice.

This spatial metaphor best describes our situation as readers within the confusion of the public and private realms. It also chimes with Auden's psycho-geography, within whose blasted spaces everything is visible, and can be described. This subliminal insistence upon visibility is pivotal, and again, is under-explained in Auden criticism. Though our position in the space of the merged public and private realms is uncertain, perception retains its vigour. Auden's economically precise, yet wholly surprising epithets and adjectives ("handsome and diseased youngsters"; "the

¹⁵⁴ John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution* (London: Constable, 1957), 130. Bayley says that "[Auden] shares with Yeats an enjoyment of the situation and of the possibilities of making it *stylish*." This element of unrestrained glee will be examined in more detail in my reading of "It's farewell to the drawing room's civilized cry" in Chapter Four.

orthodox bone”; “ingrown virginity”) are continual reminders of this robust ability to invest perception with a sense of possibility.¹⁵⁵ Emphasis on speaking, on the unfolding moment, and the frequent use of the first person plural in early Auden ensure that we understand our implication in these conditions, in this landscape. One vital atavism of conventional lyric carried over into Auden’s work is the intrinsic belief that, contrary to the many difficulties of comprehension it might display, aspects of the poem’s insight are seconded in the reader’s experience.¹⁵⁶ The result, when reading, is the sense of a tentative balance between the possibility of the imagination, and its impotence. In a poem such as “Look there! The sunk road winding” (January 1931), the voice resists definite location. At the same time it has happened upon an internal coherence of imagery and urgency that speaks directly to us:

Are we the stubborn athletes;
Are we then to begin
The run between the gin
And bloody falcon?

The horns of the dark squadron
Converging to attack;
The sound behind our back
Of glaciers calving.

The English Auden, 56.

“Are we the stubborn athletes;” - we are being spoken to as potential public actors, even when voice is lamenting our inability to act in order to avoid impending catastrophe. We are also being spoken to privately, as the audience of a warped lyricism that is finally bent into a public announcement:

Bitter the blue smoke rises
From garden bonfires lit,

¹⁵⁵ The sense of possibility attendant to perception is integral to understanding poetry’s value in mass societies. In Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, the fate of perception in the twentieth century is outlined (236): “To be still able to perceive anything at all, regardless of its quality, replaces happiness, since omnipotent quantification has taken away the possibility of perception itself.” Poetry’s project, in Adorno’s view, is to register and to attempt to correct this nadir.

¹⁵⁶ This is not to invoke the affective fallacy, but to make the statement (imperative during the rise of fascism in Europe) that open communicative channels are the protectors of human decency; and, as I will explain in Chapter Four when examining Auden’s light verse, that public language underpinned by the assumption of mutual intelligibility is indispensable to civilised societies.

To where we burning sit:
Good, if it's thorough.

Such is the meandering direction of a social lyric, rehearsing different modes of address and sustaining labile combinations of registers and lexicons. This in itself occasionally leads Auden into bravura rhetorical performances aimed at the public realm, or what is left of it, after the rise of the social. He adopts an arch ventriloquism which, decades before Adorno prescribed the crystallisation of societal relations as the *modus operandi* of art, seems to channel what Cyril Connolly called the “you-writing” of early twentieth century society generated by journalism and advertising,¹⁵⁷ whose styles came to co-opt the language of the public realm. The insinuation of excess we feel in a poem such as “Sir, no man’s enemy, forgiving all” (October 1929), with its overtones of prayer, editorial, diagnosis and oratory, might lend credibility to Smith’s claims about “the play of language” in Auden’s work were it not for the fact that the voice orchestrating the rendition calls repeatedly for material intervention from its unnamed addressee:

Sir, no man’s enemy, forgiving all
But will his negative inversion, be prodigal:
Send us to power and light, a sovereign touch
Curing the intolerable neural itch,
The exhaustion of weaning, the liar’s quinsy,
And the distortions of ingrown virginity.

The English Auden, 36.

The poem goes further than satire. It constructs as its addressee an idol for the social, in front of which it can genuflect. From the dislocation of mass society it creates a composite upon which can be focused many disparate needs – for psychological and bodily union, for leadership, for moral surety – and in doing so it undertakes the search for what Arendt calls “one-ness”, the default thinking of the monolithic that is patterned into mass-social life. Through its form, then, it is complicit in the Adornian sense. The voice calls for the recognition of the particular experience, but only contrarily, in an image that captures the reality of an etiolated private life constantly

¹⁵⁷ Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938; repr., London: Penguin, 1961), 33-34. Connolly writes, “This *arguing* style (as opposed to the soliloquy) is typical of the new relationship with the reader which is to sweep over the twentieth century and dominate journalism and advertising. It may be described as *you*-writing from the fact that there is a constant tendency to harangue the reader in the second person.” Auden’s lyric vocative is clearly parasitical upon this trend.

beset by exposure: “Cover in time with beams those in retreat / That, spotted, they turn though the reverse were great;”. Exposure to the social, the sense that my inner life does not fully belong to me, is the price paid by twentieth century modernity for visibility: for the capacity to see and to describe. Inflections such as these in Auden mean that it is perfectly tenable to read him as a precursor to Adorno’s aesthetic theory, but this runs the risk of becoming an exercise in reduction to the theoretical premise. Instead we need to describe Auden’s cultural situation more specifically, not through biography alone but with his lyric voice at the forefront. How does mass society condition intellectual debate at the time of Auden’s maturity, and how else can his lyric voice be said to be historical, in the sense of being truth-creating?

III – The Status of Poetry in the Thirties

In response to the first question we can examine a number of accounts from different points in the thirties, each of which wrestles with the question of the authority of poetry in an industrialised age. An instructive document to begin with is T. S. Eliot’s notorious lecture given at the University of Virginia in 1933 entitled “After Strange Gods – A Primer on Modern Heresy”, but Eliot’s noxious views on Jews are not important here. Predating Arendt’s ideas, Eliot’s critical work is similarly haunted by the image of clearly distinguished public and private realms, no longer tenable in the age of mass society. Such separation between the two is one of the key aspects of the meaning of his term, “tradition”. Eliot writes:

The general effect in literature of the lack of any strong tradition is twofold: extreme individualism in views, and no accepted rules and opinions as to the limitations of the literary job....When one man’s “view of life” is as good as another’s, all the more enterprising spirits will naturally evolve their own;...

...a serious writer may sweat blood over his work, and be appreciated as the exponent of still one more “point of view”.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods – A Primer on Modern Heresy: The Page Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 32, 34.

Eliot recognises that in an increasingly dynamic and integrated mass communication culture there could be no viable distinction between the “point of view” – the doxa, the chaff of an atomised cultural landscape – and the sustainable, intellectually fortified conception of the world that transcends historical event and cultural novelty, which, to him, only religious observance could deliver. Literature is put at risk by its contiguity with the ephemera of industrialised life. Christianity offers a sanctuary of permanence; Eliot’s own poetic career manifests the wish for a secure place from which to write, in lieu of clearly demarcated public and private realms and the intellectual hierarchies that they would foster. Interestingly Arendt notices the function of Christianity in this respect, as it has applied from its first articulations:

Historically, we know of only one principle that was ever devised to keep a community of people together who had lost their interest in the common world and felt themselves no longer related and separated by it. To find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world was the main political task of early Christian philosophy,...¹⁵⁹

Eliot’s critical position is only one response (and it is not the aim of this thesis to track Auden’s direction down a similar path later in his career) to the glut of doxa that characterises the societal version of the public realm by the thirties. We have seen that Auden’s poetics formulate their own response; in the context of the critical environment in which those poetics came to being, we can surmise that the doxa of mass society has the effect of freighting poetry with heavier burdens of immediacy (which explains Adorno’s suspicion of “false immediacy”).

The obvious alternative to Eliot’s socio-theology is politics. Following Arendt, we can only understand the significance of political claims for poetry in the thirties if we bear in mind that each political poem, whether knowingly or otherwise, is a-priori a commentary on the way that the public and private realms operate in their societal forms. Among the new generation of poets and poetasters Eliot’s position becomes the pole against which one must define oneself. The first significant volley aimed at Eliot by the younger generation comes from Michael Roberts in his preface to the collection *New Signatures*, published in 1932. Directing some barely veiled broadsides against Eliotic isolation and poetry which pandered to the “educated

¹⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 53.

minority”,¹⁶⁰ Roberts constructs a defining model of new poetic validity. His initial characterisation of the new voices (Auden taking centre-stage) is sweeping, predictably for a critic bearing the latest standard;

The writers in this book have learned to accept the fact that progress is illusory, and yet to believe that the game is worth playing; to believe that the alleviation of suffering is good even though it merely makes possible new sensitiveness and therefore new suffering; to believe that their own standards are no more absolute than those of other people, and yet to be prepared to defend and to suffer for their own standards; to think of the world, for scientific purposes, in terms which make it appear deterministic, and yet to know that a human action may be unpredictable from scientific laws, a new creation.¹⁶¹

We note the distinction between the macro and the micro in the last lines, whereby the determinist view is installed over the world; we note also that those unexplained “scientific purposes” are presumably based on instrumental analysis and the laws of human behaviour. It is this scientific instrumentalism that becomes a latent aspect of the thirties generation’s self-understanding.¹⁶² The presuppositions of mass society are now part of the equation of art’s nature and purpose, but Roberts’s “and yet” registers a caveat: exactly where art might fit into that society is unclear, and possibly cause for concern. What we can reasonably infer is that those “scientific purposes” cast shadows over discussions about the value of poetry. Scientific purposes have clarity as their end; they reduce a morass of factors and data down to an accessible, applicable truth. What is it that poetry, and its proxy, criticism, can clarify in mass society? This question marks the intersection of poetry and politics in the thirties.¹⁶³ Of course, the instrumentalist cast of thought comprises the basis of socialism, and

¹⁶⁰ Michael Roberts, Preface to *New Signatures*, 11.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 12-13.

¹⁶² The Bloomsbury group offered another point of polemical orientation in this respect. D. L. LeMahieu’s *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) records that the group’s response to the easily objectified principle of profit heralded by the mass communications nexus was to venerate the aesthetic experience precisely because of its ostensible removal from tawdry modernity (124-125). To critics such as Roberts this spoke of isolationism: poetry could in fact be measured according to its material effects on the individual *and* the community: the two were inseparably related even with the stipulation of difference between the general “world” and the particular “human action.”

¹⁶³ The equation between poetry and politics, and the debate about poetry’s value and applications, had been prepared by forerunning works such as *Science and Poetry* by I. A. Richards (London: Kegan Paul, 1926). Richards had written about the contiguities of poetry to psychology, where “reason” might foster a better understanding of “our own psychological makeup” (4). Poetry is proffered as a psychological clarifier in this sense, as part of a wider cultural context where the entire intellectual advancement of mankind is at stake.

influential writers and anthologists such as Roberts and Geoffrey Grigson ensured that discussions about poetry were also discussions about political life. Lyric poetry became subject to an imperative which, since the Romantics, had been alien to it. In the understanding of the thirties generation (and we are justified in using such general terms by the steady stream of critical dialogue found in anthologies and journals such as *The Listener*, *The New Statesman*, *The Criterion*, *Scrutiny* and others over the period)¹⁶⁴ poetry is no longer a solely contemplative pastime: it is instead an activity (that is, vitally, reading as well as writing) with pre-requisite communal gravity and significance. Hence the need to supplement our conception of the lyric's conventional emphasis on the subjective with an appreciation of the new communal cast of thought that accrues to it at this time. The result of this contiguity of politics (and socialism like all politics is instrumental by definition) with poetry is an era-defining preoccupation with the responsibility of the poet. Peter McDonald has written:

For both MacNeice and Auden, as for Eliot, the responsibility of literary language was the unavoidable consequence of the kind of "freedom" which the writer both experiences and questions.¹⁶⁵

"Freedom" proceeds from the public-private compound that comprises the social in the thirties. Responsibility of poets, ipso facto, is a public matter. The trope of responsibility could be articulated so stridently because the saturation point of mass society was felt to be imminent, meaning the point at which the private and the public realms lose their distinction to an unprecedented degree.

Arendt's version of the rise of society clarifies this situation. If poets had always been accountable on the basis of their being signatories of published work, then, in the early twentieth century, the burgeoning confusion among public and private imperatives that proceeded from the rise of mass society was certain to feed into the practice of writing and the habits of reading. There is an intensification of the ever-present tension between what Geoffrey Hill (borrowing from Hopkins) calls "freedom of pitch" and "freedom of field", that is, between the poet's will to

¹⁶⁴ Jason Harding has described the development of an "Oxford Clique" of poets and reviewers, centred upon Auden and Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*, which began to make its presence felt in other literary circles. *The Criterion: Cultural Politics and Periodical Networks in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88-106.

¹⁶⁵ Peter McDonald, "Believing in the Thirties", *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, eds. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman Press, 1997), 87.

communicate with exactitude and the necessarily contingent medium of that communication as language.¹⁶⁶ It follows that the poet's imperative to be clearly understood, as a matter of historical urgency, should orientate our response to thirties poetry, supplementing a consideration of poetic difficulty. In this sense we will do better justice to Auden's range. Overemphasising the problems of communication in twentieth century modernity does not adequately recognise the signal trope that when art's power of communication is seen to be fraught, as for example Edward Mendelson is surely correct in arguing, the question of *what* was communicated in art becomes generally important, and so politically articulated. Clarity and difficulty are the complementary parts of Auden's poetic dyad, and this is the measure of his work's historicity. Retreat from social reality (and expiration), or the confrontation of it: this is the self-imposed ultimatum for the thirties writers. Owing to the confusion between public and private realms this social reality will be as well described by comic and light verse as by tactically difficult, high modernist experiments.

A poem such as "Control of the passes was, he saw, the key" (January 1928) communicates the terms of the ultimatum "retreat or confront" before it is expressible as such, before it has been condensed into paraphrase for the purposes of topical discussion:

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap
For a bogus guide, seduced with the old tricks.

The English Auden, 25.

The choice of the sonnet form in which to house this unblinking narrative voice marks the earliest appearance of Auden's gift for the fruitful (and "responsible") confusion of modes. The transparency of implied prose is augmented by a subliminal music, created by the finely judged cadence of each clause and unforced syllabic chimes ("district", "get it"; "spy", "guide") which again, find their true definition through speaking the poem. By speaking the poem we inhabit the narrative stance, and the distance from the dire situation of the spy effectuated by this creates a sense of uncanny anxiety – of distanced proximity. With its transparent novelistic voice the

¹⁶⁶ Geoffrey Hill, "Our Word is Our Bond", *The Lords of Limit: Notes on Literature and Ideas* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1984), 157.

poem insists that (public) visibility is itself implicated in the spy's demise, the sonnet form offering an ironic counterpoint to this with its historical accretions of confession and privacy. Auden has captured, and made obliquely palpable, the truth of the collapse of the public and private realms into one another as society; moreover it is clear that this collapse defines the individual's self-understanding. Responsibility, then, is a matter of fidelity to this truth.

The ideal of responsibility gave rise to numerous attempts to formulate poetry's effect into something resembling practical use. Writing four years after *New Signatures* in the introduction to the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, Michael Roberts elaborated his thesis of harmonisation, and we begin to see the presumption of some thirties critics, that such poetic insight as we see in "Control of the Passes" could be harnessed, and that the influence of poetry may be detrimental rather than progressive;

But the poetic use of language can cause discord as easily as it can cure it. A bad poem, a psychologically disordered poem, if it is technically effective may arouse uneasiness or nausea or anger in the reader.¹⁶⁷

What emerges here is the prescriptiveness of Roberts's view of the poetic: it is, or should be, a restorative activity, offering an increased degree of certainty so that a decision can be made. Poetry abets decision-making, not, as Roberts explains, by aiming "directly at consolation or moral exhortation, nor at the expression of exquisite moments, but at an extension of significance;..."¹⁶⁸ Poetry's contiguity with mass communication is threatening; equally it is the index of poetry's heightened powers of affect. Eliot's fears about the reduction of intellectual culture to the aimless exchanges of "points of view" and Roberts's claims for the extended significance of poetry are intimately related; the rise of mass society has displaced poetry from its conventional moorings, those secured by a clear and operative separation between public and private realms. Poetry abets decision-making, and decision pertains to action.

¹⁶⁷ Roberts, *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 5.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

Action becomes an oft-quoted thirties motif. In Arendt's terms, as we have seen, action is the emblem of human freedom; it is world-creation, encompassing the various human activities that elucidate and instate one's individual significance to the creation of a communal life, in a historical period. Arendt contrasts action with its societal equivalent, behaviour, which is action in a travestied form. Behaviour is based on the putative sameness of every subject, and precludes the kind of reconciliation between individual and communal upon which the older concept rests. In order to avoid anachronism there can be no simple transposition of terms here, but we can see that action, as articulated by the thirties writers significantly before Arendt, represented the hope that something with this reconciliatory power might still be viable in the age of the masses. And given that it was seen to be charged with renewed communal significance, and at the same time that it continued to utter the discrete individual experience, poetry became an emblem of this possibility. Poetry carried an importance that transcended the vulgarity of mass society doxa, but still spoke using the distinctively modern grammar of urgency:

...Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.¹⁶⁹

This is Auden, in a passage of the introduction to *The Poet's Tongue* edited with John Garrett in 1935. Poetry can assist in the "rational and moral choice"; its nature is not narrowly didactic, but illuminating. In Auden's reckoning, choice remains the province of the individual, not the author: poetry has not arrogated the authority of giving instruction. Yet reading and writing poetry ought to be seen as an interdiction to deny the putative sameness of the members of mass society, and to reconfigure how individuals might be related by historical reality. The operations of poetry cannot be said to submit to an extractable political imperative: there is nothing "committed" in reading or writing poetry *per se*. Political commitment remains a matter of choice, crucially removed from the art itself, but poetry is the agent of the sense of irrefutable communal involvement which could be made manifest as (political) organisation. The crystallisation of societal relations in poetry is a given for the thirties writers, not because we can group them together in terms of their friendships, or their various

¹⁶⁹ Auden, *The English Auden*, 329.

ideological subscriptions to Marxism or socialism at any one time, or because it was often their professed aim to be “committed”, but finally because the act of writing poetry in mass society always pertains to this sense of communal involvement. This is the wider contiguity present in the thirties critical imagination of poetry with action.

We notice Auden’s qualifying “perhaps” in relation to that contiguity, which registers their fundamental separateness, and we should recall that when this famous formulation appears in his poetry in the same year it describes the novelist Isherwood’s prose:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,
What better than your strict and adult pen
Can warn us from the colours and the consolations,
The showy arid works, reveal
The squalid shadow of academy and garden,
Make action urgent and its nature clear?
Who give us nearer insight to resist
The expanding fear, the savaging disaster?

“August for the people and their favourite islands”
The English Auden, 157.

As we will see in close readings many of Auden’s most famous works of the thirties wrestle with the burden of the status of the poetic and the claims made on poetry’s behalf, claims which he saw necessary to resist in his work (Lucy McDiarmid has tracked the trajectory of Auden’s later career in light of this recurring question about the wider value of poetry).¹⁷⁰ Here, in 1935, Auden is distancing poetry from the clarification of action by placing the novelist higher in the artistic chain of beings, as if wary of producing thoughtless encomia of his art. The matter was clearly resolved for Auden early on; his critical and poetic interventions on this question all prefigure the emphatic pronouncement that “poetry makes nothing happen”, as declared by “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” in the 1940 volume *Another Time*. The cumulative effect of events in the thirties – Hitler’s seemingly irresistible rise to power in Germany and ascendancy in Europe; the eventual defeat of the Spanish Republican forces by Franco’s fascism; the evermore obvious bankruptcy of the British political class –

¹⁷⁰ Lucy McDiarmid, *Auden’s Apologies for Poetry* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990). McDiarmid writes (10): “The notion that poetry could and ought to provide absolutes constituted the central position that Auden’s poetics argued against for the rest of his life.”

cemented the belief that art's value was never located in the realm of action on the world stage, but that its existence depended on the way that the artist acknowledged the commonality of "the expanding fear, the savaging disaster" which bound members of the mass society together. Poetry cannot be said to have lost its privileged relationship to the reality of communal life that critics had claimed earlier in the decade; indeed, the fear and disaster that Auden envisaged in 1935 become the basis of the newest cultural common ground. But world-historical events have superseded discussion about the possible resolving force of the aesthetic experience. In his highly revealing book *Modern Poetry* (1938) Louis MacNeice described the poet's condition of a few years previous, and his retrospective tense takes on a regretful hue, as if the recent past seems very distant from the present:

These new poets, in fact, were boiling down Eliot's "variety and complexity" and finding that it left them with certain comparatively clear-cut issues. Instead, therefore, of attempting an impressionist survey of the contemporary world – a world which impinges on one but which one cannot deal with, they were deliberately simplifying it, distorting it perhaps (as a man of action also has to distort it) into a world where one gambles on practical ideals, a world in which one can take sides.¹⁷¹

Written at a point when the disaster motif present in cultural debate throughout the decade was now real and imminent, *Modern Poetry* testifies to a keen historical anxiety which has altered the status of the poetic in the latter part of the thirties, and the condition of the poet at this stage. Commonality of circumstance is the rule of writing in the thirties. It underpins Auden's work, as it did for every active poet of the time. Although by 1938 events have overshadowed the importance of art, this has only made the thirties thesis doubly convincing: the individual experience is best explicated not through "impressionist surveys" but through a poetry which is avowedly outward-facing. The thesis is obviously very similar in its language and orientation to Roberts's and Auden's – "distorting it perhaps (as a man of action has also to distort it)". The comparison states the same reservations as Auden's pronouncement: poetry and action are related, but ultimately different. The relation lies in their public existences, and *Modern Poetry* bears the stamp of the year's uneasiness in another way, by recognising the reality of the publicness of poetry.

¹⁷¹ Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 15.

The upshot of responsibility (and visibility) is the duty to present oneself: to make oneself knowable in some degree to one's readership. Again, only if these poets took it for granted that they were speaking in an accountable public voice would such an obligation arise.¹⁷² MacNeice is moved to provide personal descriptions of Auden and of himself, and this intriguing exercise in self-essay is a clear manifestation of the new codes of conduct applying to poetry. Writing of Auden, MacNeice states Auden's "moral" to be "growth and progress"; he describes Auden's interest in youth and education, "adolescent youth being the cockpit for striving ideologies"; he notes (indulgently) his friend's "not unfriendly contempt for the female sex, whom he regards as still precluded from civilisation by circumstances".¹⁷³ MacNeice is providing the reader with an inventory of traits, a composite image of a coherent poetic identity: coherent, that is, to a culture still being buffeted by the sea-change occasioned by a rapidly expanding nexus of mass communications, and its consequent sense of the novel proximity between classes and regions.¹⁷⁴ *Modern Poetry* is hence an instructive cultural sample, attesting to the complications of the thirties poets' demand for integration and authenticity. Here we see the public façade of the private imperative behind such poems as "The month was April" (April 1933), Auden's playful, sea-faring allegory of his psychological identity.¹⁷⁵ MacNeice's description of his own poetic composite, which verges on the satirical in its seemingly mandatory Marxian-Freudian self-account, is given uncomfortably. We are told that MacNeice's conditioning factors include his religious upbringing and the middle-classness that it implies; late puberty; the inability to play sports (shared with Auden); and "a liking for animals and an interest in dress".¹⁷⁶ Not simply in their poetry, but in the scaffolding of personality which they were duly obliged to erect around it, the thirties poets represent a watershed of the modern. It is not simply the case that MacNeice assumes the poetic voice to be unavoidably autobiographical in the thirties. *Modern*

¹⁷² The charges brought against Ezra Pound for his wartime broadcasts in America a number of years later in 1945 provide an instructive example of how the principle of accountability came to transgress the sphere of letters. In this sense Pound found himself adrift in the confusion of public and private realms. As a broadcaster his culpability extended beyond aesthetic concerns, but, as Geoffrey Hill writes, his sense of license in this instance was evidently born of his poetic vocation. Hill, *The Lords of Limit*, 154.

¹⁷³ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 86.

¹⁷⁴ Statistics on mass communications expansion: 4000 cinemas in Britain by 1934 with an average weekly attendance of 18.5m; 20m radios owned by 1934, 34m by 1939; newspaper sales reached nearly 20m per day by 1939; library membership increases from 85.7m books borrowed in 1924 to 247.3m in 1939. Andrew Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930's* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 107-109.

¹⁷⁵ Auden, *The English Auden*, 130-135.

¹⁷⁶ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 88-89.

Poetry suggests that the question goes deeper than that: that the poetic voice has a different gravity now, encompassing the confusion of the public and the private. We might speculate that the voice has an altered quality of address as a result.

More momentum is lent to the question of responsibility and publicness if we consider how literary studies was culturally pivotal in the inter-war period; the nature of the obligation to be publicly responsible felt by MacNeice and his peers originates here. Stefan Collini, D. L. LeMahieu, Terry Eagleton and more recently, Krishan Kumar have emphasised the centrality of literary studies to a fortified national and cultural self-conception, a project that was unnecessary under conditions of commercial and imperial might, but pressingly important when such might began to wane, and one which could form a last bulwark against the incursions of commercialism into cultural life.¹⁷⁷ Collini writes of the abiding English belief, stretching back to the Victorian period and beyond, in the compatibility of “deep feelings” as productive of socially desirable actions: a belief, that is, in an essential common ground. He describes the distinctly English presumption of reason which underpinned and oriented public life and private sensibility.¹⁷⁸ In this sense, the firebrands of the thirties generation were effectively giving sustenance to the presumption of “deep feelings” and basic correspondence between different factions of class, culture and politics, even as they were drawing lines and taking sides. Auden’s writing, with the lyric voice prominent, records the warping of this sense of commonality in its mass-social form, and later, its renewal - as the shared historical circumstances of impending conflict.

George Orwell (who initially viewed the Auden circle with distrust)¹⁷⁹ wrote cuttingly about these deep feelings, posing the question bluntly in 1940 of what it is that binds the English together:

¹⁷⁷ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850 – 1930*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 365-371; LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, 303; Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd Ed. (1983; repr., Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 27-28; Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) 223-225.

¹⁷⁸ Collini, *Public Moralists*, 365.

¹⁷⁹ Gordon Bowker records that in spite of his earlier acidity towards the “pansy poets”, Orwell struck up a solid friendship with Spender having met him. *George Orwell* (2003; repr., London: Abacus, 2004), 240.

But does this mean that the instinct of the English will always tell them to do the right thing? Not at all, it will merely tell them to do the same thing.¹⁸⁰

Orwell saw a potentially disastrous correspondence between the residual commonality of the English cultural experience and the means and ends of totalitarian mass societies. But I am concerned with the way in which Auden's lyric voice derives new incarnations from the shifting grounds of the historical commonality in the thirties, leading up to the war. The catastrophe of conflict created less metaphysical grounds for commonality than "deep feelings"; as the thirties progress the sense rises and we will see that Auden's variety of poetic modes proceeds from this. There is the evident feeling conveyed by his work, as by *Modern Poetry*, of submission to an assumed public scrutiny, signifying the socialising of these poets (to elaborate Arendt's terms). MacNeice's predictable disclaimers in *Modern Poetry* about the limits of biography can only partially dispel the sense that when these poets composed, they did so with the awareness that their voices circulated publicly, in a way that did not apply to poets of previous generations (even though their readership was smaller than the more established Georgian poets).¹⁸¹ The effect on Auden's lyric voice is, in Roberts's phrase, to "extend its significance". In some cases, the sense of competition between poetry and other, less exalted communication was simply too strong to ignore. MacNeice himself described the distaste toward the shared space of public expression earlier in the decade along Eliotic lines, in his poem "Turf Stacks" (September, 1932):

But those who lack the peasant's conspirators,
The tawny mountain, the unregarded buttress,
Will feel the need of a fortress against ideas and against the
Shuddering insidious shock of the theory-venders,
The little sardine men crammed in a monster toy
Who tilt their aggregate beast against our crumbling Troy.¹⁸²

Irreversibly now, the "theory-venders" – politicians, activists, angry voices of conservatism and of progress - effectively conditioned the cultural arena. By 1938, with conflict in Europe increasing and British involvement looking inevitable,

¹⁸⁰ George Orwell, "England, Your England," *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000) 148. The essay originally appeared in the December 1940 edition of *Horizon*, as "The Ruling Class".

¹⁸¹ Chris Baldick records that of the most frequently anthologised poets of the time, only Eliot could be accounted a modernist. *The Modern Movement*, 110-111.

¹⁸² MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 19

MacNeice writes that poetry can expect to make “a tiny measure”¹⁸³ of contribution within this society. Rather than making the need for action urgent and its nature clear, we assume, poetry could continue to clarify the terms of public and private life as they existed; the status of the poetry by the end of the decade is still that of an activity rooted in communal life and free from directionless self-contemplation. Auden’s lyric voice insists on this project throughout the period. His development can be recounted through the lens of modern lyric, or, in terms of different lyric voices, each of which orbits the central question of one’s place in communal life.

Before embarking upon close readings it now remains to describe the role of the reader in helping to create the distinctive vocality that can characterise the experience of reading Auden, and to find some suitable terminology to convey this. Monody and chorus are familiar terms in literary theory but their application to Auden’s work here is governed by the specific dynamic between poet and reader – and between private experience and public reality - which the work opens. Following an explanation of these terms I will examine love lyric, light lyric, political lyric, the song, and the lyric of suffering accordingly.

¹⁸³ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 18.

Chapter Three: Monody, Chorus and Love Lyric.

I – Monody and Chorus: The Reception of Auden’s Lyrics

There is an obvious risk in taking terms better known in their original ancient Greek senses and applying them to twentieth century poetry. Aside from the potential dangers of insensitivity to historical context, overemphasis on a conceptual approach to Auden would thwart my aim to re-describe the encounter with his work. My application of these terms, however, aims to avoid such overemphasis. To summarise, following a detailed survey of the works of Heidegger and Adorno in Chapter One we noted the capacity of lyric to reveal the conditions for thinking at a given historical juncture, in a way that gestured beyond those conditions, availing us of an experience that philosophy or “discursive judgment” could not prescribe. Speaking the lyric, I submitted, allows us to grasp the materiality of lyric language with a stronger purchase than is the case in an exclusively textual approach. From this perspective I turned to the milieu in which Auden first came to prominence, and noted that the thirties represented a radical new phase in the history of poetry.¹⁸⁴ The introduction of the terms “monody” and “chorus” will continue this sense of specificity rather than undermining it. Proceeding from the work of a number of scholars of ancient Greek poetry, I contend that the terms can be adapted to better convey the nature of Auden’s poetics, his importance to his age, and the nature of our encounter with his work as it is preserved undiminished.

Having drawn upon Arendt’s Greco-centric philosophical history of the public and private realms, and having recounted the emergent confusion of those realms as “society”, up to its twentieth century evolution into mass society, I am confident that there is a degree of symmetry between these Classical terms of criticism and the adumbrating historical framework invoked in the previous chapters. Monody and choral were, and still are, terms which describe the relationship between poetry and its

¹⁸⁴ This radical phase pertains to the particular kind of (supra-aesthetic) claims entertained for poetry, based on its contiguity with mass communication, which I discussed in the previous chapter, rather than the type of forms which poets such as Auden employed. Chris Baldick is keen to quash the suggestion that the Auden group represented “modernity” in the experimental sense, noting that much was done in the period to revive and rework established forms. *The Modern Movement*, 76.

reception by the individual and by the communal group (though the division is not as arbitrary as that, as we will observe). For this reason they are effective counters to the post-Romantic orthodoxy on the definition of lyric (typified by Vendler and Frye) which neglects to theorise the historical significance of the nature of our response, and also to the postmodern school of lyric-as-emblem of referential slippage (typified by Auden readers such as Emig). In short, monody and chorus are intended to elaborate a more sophisticated reader-response theory, as it relates directly to Auden's lyric. The classical origins of the terms invite us to include a sense of the reader's orientation in relation to the unfolding lyric moment in close readings, even when, as according to certain conventions of love poetry for example, we are teasingly excluded from the experience that a given poem relates. Hence monody, and later chorus, is used here as an indicator of the new gravity of reading and responding to lyric poetry in the twenties and thirties, and thereafter. I do not claim that Auden himself used the terms explicitly (much less that he wrote with them in mind), but that they assist in elucidating his lyric poetry afresh. The attraction of monody and chorus lies in the way that they go beyond taxonomy. They allow us to articulate how the reader is implicated in the reality of the poem, that is, in the time of its utterance, so as to negate any suggestion of purely detached contemplation. Instead they confirm poetry as an activity with objective significance (in this sense I build upon Adorno's situation of lyric as the bearer of a special kind of historical objectivity).

Although I do not contend that Auden understood his poetry in this way, my application of monody and chorus here arises from the work itself, and not from a preconceived theoretical standpoint. More specifically, the efficacy of monody and chorus to Auden studies resides in their communal bearings, as they echo his thematic preoccupations. Chiefly they help refine the difference between the "communal" and "common" responses to his work, as I will explain. I use monody and chorus to refer to the particular kinds of critical reflexivity fostered by lyric poetry as it is spoken by the reader, where choral reflexivity evokes a communal experience, and its monodic counterpart reveals the dimensions and nature of the common in thirties (and post-thirties) modernity. The question occurs: what defines the distinction between the common experience and the communal?

The historical sources and manifestations of the sense of commonality in the thirties, from the belief in cohesive “deep feelings” to the reality of conflict, were relayed previously, but there is of course a distinct difference between commonality, which suggests only the sharing of circumstance, and the communal sense, which has a stronger positive inflection and which implies notions of belonging. In the setting of mass society, as we learned from Hannah Arendt, the common experience may not present adequate grounds to clarify how one is separated from others, and how one is related.¹⁸⁵ But the lyric’s rendition of such an experience will indeed work to clarify those relationships. I submit that this clarifying power, when relating to the common experience, comprises the monodic voice. Adorno’s reworked version of mimesis helps us to convey this. Auden’s monody, in line with its Classical heritage, can be approached as the expression of an individuated self, but one which, through the exchange with the speaking reader, encourages the communion of particular experiences that remains beyond reach outside of an aesthetic setting. The choral voice, in contrast, accesses and renders the communal experience, by circumventing the problems of such interrelationships in mass society. The choral mode is premised on surface identification, on an unproblematic equation between the experience recounted in the lyric and the reader’s reception: as such it requires a more specific account of its aesthetic qualities which I will provide in Chapter Four.

Some problems suggest themselves straight away, however. Stated in this manner, it appears that the choral mode gives the lie to the monodic and vice versa. Which, we are tempted to ask, is the genuine lyric article, the monodic or the choral? Does the simple possibility of choral lyric suggest the narrowness of this Adorno-sponsored version of monody? If this were the case, and the term monody was prescriptive, would we run into a converse problem of simplifying what happens when we read Auden’s different manners of lyric address? Furthermore, is the choral simply an instance of false immediacy, and a misrepresentation of the true terms of societal interrelationships (which would risk casting a central aspect of Auden’s poetics aside)?

¹⁸⁵ Arendt *The Human Condition*, 53.

The truth is that the monodic and the choral are complementary tendencies, both of which can be understood in terms of the distanced proximity effect which, I contend, defines the modern lyric. Of course, a very different sense of proximity obtains in each case and it will be necessary to describe this difference in detail. (Remembering Peter Porter's remark, we should avoid the procrustean approach to Auden based on the dubious supposition of a proper response to history.)¹⁸⁶ Essentially I seek to avoid the drier areas of taxonomy. Monody and choral correspond to the variety of Auden's lyric voices which speak from different and, when taken as a whole, agonistic positions in relation to twentieth century modernity; here in moments of exclusion and there in inclusion; here with the collective voice and there with its individuated corollary. Again, because it is preferable to avoid fixing the poems as repositories of preconceived ideas, and because it is more important to properly understand the full repercussions of Auden's range, there can be no suggestion that one aspect of Auden's corpus ought to take precedence over another. Monody and chorus, though inducing altered responses from the speaking reader, are employed to convey the proper direction of lyric address. Put differently, in all cases I find it necessary to resist an abiding assumption about modern lyric poetry: that more often than not it simply speaks to itself.

Once again Eliot provides us with the most direct avenue into this question, with his lecture "The Three Voices of Poetry" written in the early fifties. The certainty of his categorisations seems to invite dispute:

The first [voice] is the poet talking to himself – or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse;... The distinction between the first and the second voice, between the poet speaking to himself and the poet speaking to other people, points to the problem of poetic communication;...¹⁸⁷

From these classifications Eliot coins the term "meditative verse" as an alternative to lyric; he remarks on the lack of precision in the latter.¹⁸⁸ But we can question the

¹⁸⁶ Peter Porter, *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, 129.

¹⁸⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Three Voices of Poetry* (1953; repr., London: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

apparently uncomplicated severance of Eliot's first two voices given above. It is clear elsewhere that he is writing more as a fellow practitioner than a reader or critic:

In a poem which is neither didactic nor narrative, and not animated by any other social purpose, the poet may be concerned solely with expressing in verse – using all his resources of words, with their history, their connotations, their music – this obscure impulse. He does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in the effort to say it he is not concerned with making other people understand anything. He is not concerned, at this stage, with other people at all: only with finding the right words.¹⁸⁹

Eliot can confidently locate the first voice, that of the poet talking to himself or to nobody, because this voice is heard exclusively by poets, as the voice of composition. It bears only a preliminary relation to the voice that the reader encounters in print and then utters for him or herself; this new voice exists somewhere between Eliot's first and second categories, between the voice talking to itself or to nobody and the voice addressing an audience, whether large or small.¹⁹⁰ Eliot's updating lyric to "meditative verse" risks exiling the encounter with the poem into the realm of the purely contemplative. Though a sense of detachment or abstraction may characterise the lyric on the page, our response modulates the apparently staunch interiority of the form.¹⁹¹ Hence by speaking poetry, and so by becoming freshly aware of its materiality, this contemplative aspect is offset by the suggestion of our presence in a communicative exchange which belies the reader's estrangement from the time and place of the poem's utterance.

Monody and choral are apposite terms with which to map the different experiences of reading Auden precisely because they comprised the original early

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 17-18.

¹⁹⁰ In this respect Eliot's earlier account of the dynamic between poet and reader given in "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" (1933) is, I think, more helpful: "The poem's existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to 'express', or of his experience of writing it, or of the experience of the reader or of the writer as reader. Consequently the problem of what a poem 'means' is a good deal more difficult than it first appears." *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (1975; repr., London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 80.

¹⁹¹ Graham Hough uses Eliot's pronouncement on "the poet talking to himself" to orient his discussion of modernist lyric. As such he maintains that interiority and the personal experience continued to define the form, and includes Auden in his account. Graham Hough, "The Modernist Lyric", *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1991), 312-322.

Greek melic modes: modes that conditioned lyric poetry's defining attachment to music. Roger A. Hornsby and T. V. F. Brogan offer the following account:

Early Greek melic poetry (q. v.) is divided into two general classes, the choral ode, sung to flute accompaniment with a dancing chorus - ... and solo song or monody - originally an ode sung by a single voice, e.g. by one of the characters in a tragedy, or to a more private audience, as at a symposium. The Sapphic and Alcaic (qq. v.) are the principal subgenres. Its themes were wider in scope than those associated with modern lyric – they include politics and satire, for example – but it came to be associated with the lamentation of a single mourner and hence came to refer to a dirge (q. v.) or funeral song. In metrical form the strophies are isometric (q. v.), i.e. repeated without variation.¹⁹²

The application of these terms in their strict Classical sense to Auden's work can only be speculative owing to the obvious historical remove. However I contend that they provide an apparatus which helps us to singularise each of his lyric poems, while keeping them in a coherent, and alongside Arendt's work, historically attuned context. We have seen that the central antinomy of Auden's early poetry pertains to a poetic communication at once restricted and liberated by the co-contamination of public and private realms in mass society. Auden's choral mode, with its confident music and self-advertising ease of repetition, is readily identifiable in early poems already described, such as "We have made all possible preparations" and "It's no use making a shout". The "we" (or the "I" which speaks as representative) in these cases speaks of a common experience by way of negation: one whose essence is otherwise ineffable given the pre-eminence of behaviour in the modern age and the abandonment of the public realm to the "point of view". Auden's light verse experiments of the mid thirties (examined in the next chapter) proceed from this interrogation of the common experience, testing its ability to foster the stronger communal sense. We will see that in light verse the poem annexes for itself a kind of provisional public sphere, into which our response is a form of entry.

The monodic mode is less easy to identify in terms of pronouns, and other immediate features of poetics, and for this reason it is better illustrated in close readings than in selective quotations. The love lyrics that follow will comprise the first collection of examples. Monody applies to those works that, as indicated above,

¹⁹² Definition given in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 798.

have a solo voice in their foreground, but more specifically it carries an illuminating purpose which relates metaphorically to the element of mourning associated with its ancient forebear.¹⁹³ In the modern sense that I propose, monody describes distanced proximity - the feeling of simultaneous closeness to and separation from the speaker's experience - that can characterise the experience of reading Auden, and which is an emblem of his historicity. Here we need to be cautious in our application of the term. The audience of ancient monody was necessarily present before the speaker: mourning was in that case, as we learned from Hornsby and Brogan, the literal mourning of the dead. (We will examine Auden's elegies of the late thirties, as instances of literal mourning, in Chapter Seven). Lucy McDiarmid has written about the myth of a "prelapsarian oral era" entertained in the twenties and thirties by Yeats and Eliot, which conditioned so much of Auden's critical output and a good deal of his poetry.¹⁹⁴ But the efficacy of the terms monody and chorus to Auden's work does not derive from a speculatively unsullied form of poetic communication, which in any case Auden distrusted. (As McDiarmid writes, Auden always conceded that "he could not be a folk bard if he tried";¹⁹⁵ and aside from his personality, twentieth century modernity proscribed any such role.) In fact, quite the reverse: monody and chorus are terms encouraged by Auden's attunement both to the possibilities and restrictions attaching to poetry in twentieth century modernity, which brings us back to the original mourning denoted by monody.

In its twentieth century form we could surmise that the element of mourning takes on a metaphorical aspect. Auden's poetry does not explicitly mourn a lost, physically present audience; to assert as much about a modern poet would be to misrepresent the centuries-long assumptions of writing patterned into the printed lyric, as well as to cast aside the attitudes of Auden himself. Neither does this element of mourning attest to the scission of truth from beauty, testimony which, in his Adornian reading of Kant's categories of the three *Critiques*, Jay Bernstein presents as the project of both philosophy and art in modernity:

¹⁹³ Milton's "Lycidas" is introduced as a monody in the conventional Classical sense: "In this monody the author bewails a learned friend, unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637." John Milton, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard, (London: Penguin, 1998), 41.

¹⁹⁴ Lucy McDiarmid, *Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot and Auden Between the Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 62.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

...every conception of alienation of art from truth is simultaneously a work of remembrance, a work of mourning and grief, even for those philosophers who doubt that such an “original” state of union ever existed....modernity is the site of beauty bereaved – bereaved of truth.¹⁹⁶

Aesthetic alienation poses an interesting context for Auden’s work, but it becomes inexact when we consider the detail of Auden’s lyric modes. Rather than mourning the severance of truth from beauty, Auden’s poetry registers the dislocation of speaker from reader while insisting upon the reality of a common historical experience and the potential for a viable, stronger sense of communion, for which the exchange between the textual speaker and the speaking reader stands as a synecdoche. This is the nature of our involvement in the activity of lyric poetry.

It is thus that monody and chorus offer a more precise way of accounting for how we might “preserve” the insights of lyric poetry, in Heidegger’s term. Again, speaking is pivotally important here. It is something that W. R. Johnson, whose work was introduced previously, does not recognise when from a Classical vantage point he defines the modern lyric simply according to what it can no longer achieve or signify. Indeed, as Johnson has it, ancient monody enshrined the dynamic between “I” and “you” which afforded poetry its power:

The specific context, the fiction of I and You and their situation of discourse, concretizes the universal, makes it perceptible and makes it singable.¹⁹⁷

If the lyric “I” really did incur the damage by the “speculations of Hegel, Marx and Darwin” that Johnson suggests, this is not to say that in its modern form it cannot concretise the universal and make it perceptible. If not evidently singable (and much of Auden’s work professedly is), the modern lyric is at the very least speakable, because the implication of a present voice, speaking in sonorous language, is manifest in lyric poetics. The materiality of lyric poetry retains the verbal aspect as an essential feature. This speaking is never a static, quarantined rehearsal of the poet’s thoughts (as Barbara Everett reminded us in reference to Auden). On the contrary it is kinetic: kinetic because we preserve those thoughts and insights by uttering them for

¹⁹⁶ Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 4.

¹⁹⁷ W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric*, 4.

ourselves, by adapting them. This approach to vocality – to the nature of the colloquy between textual and readerly voices - is always radically objective. Even in lyrics of a pronouncedly traditional voice and stance, our own utterance is the corollary of the poet's self-perceived retreat from human relations. This mutuality of voices achieves poetry's objectivity. A passage from *Aesthetic Theory* can refine this for us, summarising key aspects of Adorno's thought in the meantime. It is worth quoting at length, because the opening propositions apply to the thirties climate:

That artworks intervene politically is doubtful; when it does happen, most often it is peripheral to the work; if they strive for it, they usually succumb to their own terms. Their true social effect is an extremely indirect participation in spirit that by way of subterranean processes contributes to social transformation and is concentrated in artworks; they only achieve such participation through their objectivation. The effect of artworks is not that they present a latent praxis that corresponds to a manifest one, for their autonomy has moved far beyond such immediacy; rather, their effect is that of recollection, which they evoke by their existence. If the historical genesis of artworks refers back to causal contexts, these do not disappear tracelessly in them; *the process enacted internally by each and every artwork works back on society as the model of a possible praxis in which something on the order of a collective subject is constituted* [my italics].¹⁹⁸

Our speaking the lyric poem is our own “participation in spirit”: it is the means by which we actively construct a “model of a possible praxis” based on the constitution of a collective subject. So from the practice of ancient monody to the practice of its modern form, a history of proximity can be broached; this history records the transition from physical to psychical. Speaking Auden's lyric revives a sense of proximity to another's inner life, but simultaneously testifies to the distance that has been installed between subjects according to the collapsed public and private realms. Because of the radical sense of disorientation that can arise for us, speaking Auden's lyric also guards against the kind of blind equation between experiences that are falsely immediate, and which Arendt shows to be a measure of our subjection to an etiolated version of (behavioural) selfhood fostered by mass society.

As Stan Smith and Rainer Emig would have it, Auden's speakers record the violence of their internal divisions. This much is true of many poems, but to posit this on the textual basis alone is to discount the decisive sense of readerly activity that

¹⁹⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 242.

speaking the lyric induces. If we approach the lyric solely from the textual perspective, then the traumas of division variously recorded by Auden's early work are ratified by our own experience of the poems. We are left to reconstruct, to meditate: in effect, we remain consciously external to the experience being related by Auden's speakers. The reality of division and subjection is consequently far from our understanding. From the vocal perspective, however, this reality is closer. In speaking, the temporality of lyric utterance is made manifest, and temporality is central here. We are granted a different kind of access, which is not narrowly immediate and unreflective because the act of speaking manifests our distance from the experience relayed, as when our pursuit of coherence and meaning competes with the momentum of the lyric itself, which we speak at its own, given pace. Auden's favoured shorter line - rooted in dimeter, though loose enough to evoke the spontaneous voice – secures this effect in much of his early work:

Simple to prove
That deeds indeed
In life succeed
But love in love
And tales in tales
Where no one fails.

“The silly fool, the silly fool”
The English Auden, 35.

Or:

Between attention and attention
The first and last decision
Is mortal distraction
Of earth and air,
Further and nearer,
The vague wants
Of days and nights
And personal error;

“Between attention and attention”
The English Auden, 52.

Thus is produced the contrary, but finally enabling sense of *distanced proximity* that, I contend, defines monody. Distanced proximity provides avenues and forms of expression that arise from the communicative possibilities of twentieth century

modernity, as much as it records the privations (subjective isolation, historical powerlessness) that are endured. Crucially in Auden's case those possibilities shape his gift for light verse and conventional song lyrics. The primary difference between monody and choral in the context of Auden's work, then, is the difference in his response to the conditions for lyric from a certain perspective, common or communal. As the above examples demonstrate, monody is not dependant on pronouns for its effect as a reading experience; it is rather a description of the (unfolding) processes of our response, howsoever they may be guided. In monody our *critical* response is swiftly elicited, and so we become aware of the problematic conditions for communication as they stand. In choral, we echo what we read in a less self-conscious way, as we are emplaced a-priori in an historical setting. As a result, monody often maps on to the question of difficulty in Auden's work (though not all monodic lyrics are difficult to read or comprehend). Moreover the term encourages us to describe how that difficulty is experienced: how the difficult lyric generates particular meanings through its resistance to immediate comprehension, with its parallel encouragement of an immediate critical reaction.

II – “Who am I with?”

Looking more closely at Classical scholarship we observe that, at its root, monody is a term that evolved according to the nature of its audience. G. M. Kirkwood records the stages of the evolution of monody and choral from the mid fifth century, reminding us that “nowhere in the ancient classifications is the distinction made between choral and monodic”.¹⁹⁹ Their development is mutually determined; first monody and choral are closely twinned, typified by the songs of Archilochus and Pindar which specified a public occasion or function; these were followed by addresses to a private audience exemplified by Alcaeus and Sappho; and the purely personal poetry of Anacreon completes the trajectory. Kirkwood writes:

..., one could say in summary that monody begins its history as the poetic response of a society that has grown away from monarchy and feudalism and has come to value the exploits and opinions of the

¹⁹⁹ G. M. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody: The History of a Poetic Type* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 10.

citizen; that it reaches the high point of its development with two contemporary poets the intensity of whose emotional and social attachments can only be satisfied by the loyalties and excitements of special groups within the state; and that it has, in another generation, moved away from its original role as the expression of a citizen, the *politês*, and has taken on the private voice of the artist as observer and craftsman.²⁰⁰

The central question regarding monodic and choral poetry thus understood is “who I am with?”: whether I am one among many, whether I am a citizen, whether I am one of a band of intimates and friends, or whether I am alone. These variables neatly correspond to Auden’s recurrent thematic concerns like love, the political life, suffering, and the power of poetry itself - ever-present, as Lucy McDiarmid indicates, as a point of contention. The total solitude for the lyric speaker that modernity makes possible (and Johnson names Mallarmé and Plath as two poets whose work is traumatised by the shock of the “death of the lyric”)²⁰¹ does not denude or foreclose the question of who I am with, because that question is one of the fundamental questions about historical existence (as Heidegger suggests at length when elaborating his concept of Dasein)²⁰² and one which animates the thirties controversy about poetry’s relation to politics.²⁰³ So the monodic and choral modes of reading that Auden’s work induces are ways of asking that fundamental question, directly implicating the speaking reader whether the experience described is intensely personal, as in a love poem, or whether it is programmatically general, as in a light poem.

Love poetry, from this perspective, can be understood as inaugural for Auden’s lyric identity, not simply due to the numerous psychological and philosophical articulations of love that he drew upon as ideas (stretching from

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 198.

²⁰¹ Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric* 21.

²⁰² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, I .4. 26-27. Heidegger describes human interrelationships in terms of “solicitude”. Solicitude – roughly, the manner of Being towards each other – bears within it the openness of communion between human beings (fostering “care”) or, as is the case in mass society, it becomes the index of our estrangement from one another. But “Being-with”, or *Mitsein*, is the condition for all human relationships; for instance (162): “Empathy” does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does “empathy” become possible: it gets its motivation from the unsociability of the dominant modes of Being-with.”

²⁰³ We see the shadow of the question “who am I with” linger over many of Eliot’s famous pronouncements. In “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism” Eliot famously states that he “should like an audience which could neither read nor write. The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste – stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration.” *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 94.

Platonic ideals to Lawrentian anti-bourgeois freedoms), but because of the reading practice that it generates.²⁰⁴ Edward Mendelson uses love as the prism through which a faithful account of Auden's intellectual development is relayed, identifying the June 1933 poem "Out on the lawn I lie in bed", later titled "A Summer Night", as the marker for Auden's departure from the frustrations of erotic love and subjective isolation in the earlier work, and the beginnings of his spiritual awakening that would later be compounded in his return to Christianity.²⁰⁵ Anthony Hecht considers this poem and the rest of the 1937 (American) volume *On This Island* as Auden's advocacy of "the curative power of love", with its various presentations of the powers of Eros and Agape.²⁰⁶ In narrative terms, both critics are correct. Although proceeding in chronological order, my own selection of love lyrics is less concerned with the chronology of development, centring instead on the different manifestations of the monodic lyric voice. Hence I detach love from the matter of Auden's personal spiritual growth, or his advocacy of love in his critical arguments, to a certain extent. This allows us to examine instead how theme and voice merge in discrete instances like "For what as easy" and "That night when joy began", as well as how love is presented as an idea by the monodic voice in examples such as "Out on the lawn I lie in bed" and "Our hunting fathers told the story".

How do we participate in love lyrics? The notion of participation in Auden's poetry - the way that our response is carefully prompted by and implicated in the meaning of the work - has been frequently acknowledged, although usually in very general terms. John R. Boly's account of the centrality of voice in Auden is informed by deconstruction, finding its mandate in the "insidious belligerence of Auden's voices"²⁰⁷ which I have already discussed as a key aspect of the Audenesque. But the theoretical basis of his approach must ascribe a particular intention to Auden where one cannot be said to have existed and, once more, we are given a one-sided approach to vocality:

²⁰⁴ Richard Bozorth avers that Auden treats poetry "as a kind of virtual lovers' discourse" at this stage of his career. *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, 176.

²⁰⁵ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 159-176.

²⁰⁶ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 40-80.

²⁰⁷ John R. Boly, *Reading Auden: The Returns of Caliban* (London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 8. Boly argues (9) that this belligerence was an aspect of Auden's debt to Homer Lane and John Layard, the poet developing "Lane's psychosomatic theories into a means of discursive analysis."

...just as there can be no utterance, no authoritative claim or definitive statement, without an accompanying set of dissident gestures, so there can be no meaning without a companion syntax, the movements and gestures of its predicative endeavour. Through a series of remarkable textual experiments, then, Auden explored the possibility that in the course of achieving its repression of an audience, the presiding voice of a discourse unwittingly, helplessly, enacted a series of betraying syntactic gestures.²⁰⁸

The problem is again one of assumed premeditation on the poet's part: in my view Auden explored no such possibility because his "presiding voices" never belong to a "discourse" in the first place, and though his concerns include the potential misuse of language as the weapon of ideology, they extend in other directions. His voices allow for the rehearsal of different tones and registers as a form of historical crystallisation, but this is not the same thing. It is not the case that Auden simply inhabits the voice of the bourgeois, say, or the acolyte of the military industrial complex, just so that we readers can pride ourselves on shooting it down; or as Boly suggests, just so that we can note the way that the referential slippage intrinsic to the linguistic sign necessarily works against the fixity of meaning. This would prejudice the encounter with Auden's voices. Elsewhere, Boly's version of reading Auden is one that I recognise, but his requisite insistence on poetry as the presentation of (textual) indeterminacy to the total exclusion of sentiment is a mischaracterization of the poet, and finally hampers his argument. His opening echoes Lacoue-Labarthe:

He [Auden] does not try to say or express anything. Thus he rejects both the visionary ideal and the communicative function it assumes. This rejection serves as a means, however, the beginning not the end of his social commitment. For in refusing to play the visionary / communicative role, Auden thereby opens a way to articulate the workings of an alternative function, one dedicated to a play of contrasts rather than a serious expression of final truth. And it is from a reader's active participation in this textual play that the social function of art is derived.²⁰⁹

The contradiction in this thesis is unavoidable. Securing the reader's "active participation", not to say an extractable ethical message, is impossible if the poet "does not try to say or express" something. Otherwise, how can that participation be said to arise at all? Boly's treatment of the voice is textual; he does not account for the fact that the address of lyric poetry, as we have seen, induces the literal act of

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 47.

speaking, which bypasses the purely textual model of poetry he invokes. Speaking in lyric is never (textually) self-enthralled; it depends on belief in the substance of what is being uttered. This is not to equate the lyric voice only with surface sincerity. Rather, the lyric voice can sustain any number of tones and registers. Love poetry, most obviously, hinges upon the sentiment expressed: upon the delicate interplay between the revelation of feeling and the withholding of certain details, in order to allow us to participate in the lyric in a particular way. Running parallel with the importance of love as a recurring concept in Auden's intellectual life is the enabling quality of his love lyrics, making us newly conscious of our engagement with poetry. Love is more than an idea in Auden's work: his lyric voices first find their singularity in love poetry, drawing us closer as they hold us at a necessary distance.²¹⁰ This is how we participate in love lyric.

III – Love Lyrics

“For what as easy”: October 1931. *The English Auden*, 113.

Later included as one of “Five songs” in the 1966 *Collected Poems*, “For what as easy” introduces the speaker of Auden's love lyrics, and becomes a self-contained dissertation on the explicability of intimate feelings. His speaker moves gracefully between hushed registers, heartened by the intellectual assurance that can follow from erotic sensation. The attempt is made by Auden's speaker to render this sensation lyrically – it is distilled such that when we speak the poem, it becomes newly perceptible. From the standpoint of this kind of interpretative unity, we can ask: If the experience of love could be compacted down to one grammatical principle or unit, what would it be?

²¹⁰ In her searching (and evidently Adornian) work, *The American Love Lyric After Auschwitz and Hiroshima* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) Barbara L. Estrin examines the work of Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell and Adrienne Rich, and considers how the distance between poet and loved one resonates in a wider historical context. Estrin analyses their respective engagements with the Petrarchan representations of love and the other, and describes the parallel that each poet makes between the desubjectification (or immolation) of the loved one in the Petrarchan mode and the wider relationship between self and other that makes historical catastrophes such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima possible. This (thematic) distance needs to be distinguished from the (experiential) distance, felt by the reader, from the sentiment of love attested in the lyric: distance which encourages the critical recognition of experiences and presences other than my own.

In “For what as easy”, Auden takes that basic unit of love to be the preposition, and employs it as a statement of intent. In the preposition the two lovers find linguistic union as one word, which implies their pronominal status but is not finally defined therein. What happens when “I” and “you” become “we”, and “our” experiences become *an* experience, becomes “with” and “between”? Auden’s speaker turns his back to the reader, apparently for his own amusement. The poem would have us recognise our distance from the erotic; some things, it seems, are necessarily lost in the telling. But this absence is offset by the way the poem exists on its own terms – as experience – in the reader’s comprehension. In this sense the difficulty presented by the lyric is duplicitous. We are encouraged to look for a “beyond” to the poem because of its stylistic effect, at the cost of overlooking the essential point: Auden’s speaker has found a language which occupies the (quasi-mythical) intermediary space between lovers, between the lovers as subjects. Refining, revising, re-describing the relation of one lover to another (significantly, in the present tense), with ambivalent syntactic structures and with what William Empson would have called fifth-type ambiguity (“when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing”),²¹¹ Auden’s speaker fosters an immediate semantic confusion, the understated and rapid resolution of which signifies the sense of peace afforded by love:

For what as easy
 For what though small
 For what is well
 Because between
 To you simply
 From me I mean.

The construction “For what” is perhaps declamatory, the subject being love itself, as if the speaker is evangelising the power of love with a sense of certainty. But the use of the three leading predicates (“as easy”; “though small”; “is well”) would seem archly to deny any rhetorical fixity: this is not a sermon, or an argument in the Eliotic manner. We note that “For what” is as much a question as it is a species of archaism (recalling as it does the opening of a maxim or proverb). It is a question that is answered in prepositions, in the statement of physical and emotional relations (“Because between”). Striking notes of poetical grandstanding (“For what....*reason*”;

²¹¹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; repr., London: Hogarth Press, 1984), 155.

or “For what...*purpose*”), and ushering in a deeper uncertainty, the trajectory of “For what as easy” is apparently convoluted from the beginning. With this convolution in mind, we ask, what is the status of love, in the modern age?

In asking this, we see that inarticulacy and confusion, self-misunderstanding and estrangement, are remedied in love. “Because between / To you simply / From me I mean”. In love, in union, the speaker “means”. Put differently, the speaker is subject, the lover his or her predicate, in a way that is not simply figurative. Language and experience coincide for the lovers, and as readers we receive a tantalising impression of this. In the time-honoured style of love-lyric, the speaker is emboldened by the experience of love, wryly dismissive of all else.²¹² As readers we are voyeurs; the following verses are spoken in the vocative but the reader is their addressee. We, the non-participants, are held at a teasing distance, mired in a world of fact, trifling gossip and equally trifling metaphysics:

Who goes with who
The bedclothes say
And I and you
Go kissed away
The data given
The senses even.

Bridging that place of contended, beatified isolation where love dwells with the world of doxa in which it has to subsist, this verse heralds the return to the mundane with the employment of a full iambic rhythm allied to a simple cross-rhyme scheme, so pointedly achieved as to gesture towards the ironic. The burden to reduce, to describe, to account for love almost amounts to a kind of infantilism, whence the note of the playground chant quickly and indulgently made adult (“Who goes with who / The bedclothes say”). In a self-conscious concession to the modern, the parting of the lovers is described (in the “data” and the “senses”) with a deadened sense of the scientific, as a mere interchange of energy.²¹³ The shortcomings of this culturally

²¹² The attitude is redolent of Donne, particularly “The Sunne Rising”: “Thy beames, so reverend, and strong / Why shouldst thou thinke? / I could eclipse and cloud them with a winke, / But that I would not lose her sight so long.” John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. David Campbell (1985; repr., London: Everyman Library Press, 1991), 53.

²¹³ Scientific language in love poetry has, of course, many precedents. In *Supreme Attachments: Studies in Victorian Love Poetry* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 1998) Kerry McSweeney lists Arnold, Tennyson

esteemed vocabulary alert us to the different gravity of mimesis (in the conventional Aristotelian sense) as Auden's lyric employs it. The equation essential to mimesis – from the personal experience to its representation for others in art – is, on one level, palpably at odds with the imperative of love to retain a world within itself, to find self-sufficiency in “us”. On another level it is entirely apt, because that leap from isolated subjectivity to loving union is echoed and paralleled in our reception of the lyric. The principal actors of the lyric love fully; as readers we love vicariously. The scientism here is put to contrary, ironical use: as the concealment of intensity rather than as transparent, neutral explication. The reader seeks an end to mystery – we want to fix and uncover - but the lyric preserves it. In being concealed, love is valorised anew for us: this is the monodic effect of distanced proximity. The lyric situates the reader both as privileged eavesdropper into the intimate, and one who is forbidden to intrude. Living in the world of fact, the joke is on us. Teasing us for our removal from the fullness of love, the lyric offers a consolation through its aesthetic strategy: that the preservation of mystery is an instructive experience for us.

Through this melange of different registers - of fun-making and seriousness – “For what as easy” is rooted in contradiction, positioned somewhere between the whimsy of childhood reverie and the jaded, avowedly modern assumption toward detached analysis. Fittingly this translates into a three-stanza trajectory of intimate-public-worldly, as if the speaker feels licensed by social existence:

Fate is not late
Nor the ghost houseless
Nor the speech re-written
Not the tongue listless
Nor the word forgotten
Said at the start
About heart
By heart, for heart.

Here, finally, the speaker enters the arena of the mundane on the level of the orator or contending advocate. Love, though inexplicable, can be communicated as a spur of

and Louisa Bevvington as among the number of Victorian poets whose works “recognize that the processes of nature discovered by science have negative implications for romantic love” (6). Auden's facility and ease with science is a feature of all biographical accounts, and his poetics in this instance employ scientific language without such negativity, as if the vocabulary (and the attitude it represents) are part of the mother-tongue, are ready-to-hand.

optimism. The speaker responds to the features of the backdrop of social modes and attitudes that circumscribes the lovers. Such a backdrop gives this love its unique texture, as something oppositional. Love - without body, without doctrine, and so emphatically opposed to the spirit of the times - is still a butterfly in the chaos of the modern; it is a restorative of sorts, encouraging confidence in traditionally advocated ideas of progress ("Fate is not late"), history ("Nor the ghost houseless"), continuity and communication ("speech", "tongue", "word").

What provides the lyric with its singularising force? How does it reach beyond its conditions to point towards a new way of thinking? As a meditation on modern love, "For what as easy" can be said to testify to the diminished possibility of experience, but in a manner that avoids cynicism. At the end of the lyric the modern faith of love is enshrined, but the neat echo of the opening, which focuses on the unit of the two, would suggest an implicit caveat not to get too carried away. If love is a force then, necessarily, it cannot be marshalled. We cannot know the wider quality of affect it has, being of "heart"; it cannot submit itself to the public terms of the modern and become purposive. On the terms of its trajectory outwards, toward the worldly, "For what as easy" can be said tactically to enrich this sense of unattainable love, that is, unattainable to us, the reader-voyeurs. By presenting the redemption by love of high-flown ideas such as progress and meaningful history in the final stanza, Auden has at once reaffirmed and compromised those ideas - reducing them to a litany, to so much padding for the self in between episodes of immersion in the fullness of love. As readers of "For what as easy" we look back to this fullness, which the aesthetic of the lyric implies but never expounds. Perhaps we, the readers, imitate a conventional love lyric lament for what has been glimpsed and lost, in this respect.²¹⁴ We must content ourselves with a second-hand confidence and peace: we must take the speaker at his word, accepting our experiential remove from the intensity of the union described. Love, then, reassures us of the communicative power of the aesthetic and of its own transformative potential, but under the terms of a promise whose riches are postponed.

²¹⁴ Christina Rossetti's "May" is a good example of this convention: "I cannot tell you what it was; / But this I know: it did but pass. / It passed away with sunny May, / With all sweet things it passed away, / And left me old, and cold, and grey." *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 473.

“That night when joy began”: November 1931. *The English Auden*, 113.

The post-coital languor of this short lyric demonstrates the economy of Auden’s love poetics, and how the interiority of the erotic experience is realised aesthetically. This experience amounts to a riposte to cultural censure, using that censure, in fact, to sweeten the erotic experience all the more: to elevate it to the level of the socially symbolic. Through a revolution of temporal imagery into spatial, undertaken in tandem with an alteration from past to present tense, the lyric captures the sense of the illicit in the erotic encounter. Sensual fulfilment seems to subvert and to mock the mundane, where bodily frustration and spiritual fragmentation rule. It is this momentary subversion of the mundane which informs the tone of quiet relish amidst danger:

That night when joy began
Our narrowest veins to flush
We waited for the flash
Of morning’s levelled gun.

Using an interlocking rhyme scheme, in which both arch rhymes and cross rhymes are implied, and the pointed iambic tetrameter, the lyric voice announces its confidence to recount the erotic candidly, on the level of physical indulgence, heedless of the consequences (“That night” is confrontational in its immediate suggestiveness). The archaic syntax - with the infinitive “to flush” positioned at the end of the suggested clause - carries a barbed ironical twist, alerting us to the demonstrably “poetical” status of this address, as though the voice is feeding upon lyric convention as a mode of rhetoric in order to expound the illicit, where “flush” signifies both purification and engorgement. As speaking readers we are granted access into the psychological terrain, but because the lyric is about satiety, a sense of the physical reality of lovemaking lingers about its poetics (the pararhymes “flush” and “flash” combine sensuously, for example: when spoken aloud they sound positively indulgent).

In effect, the lyric describes the lovers’ defeat of a certain kind of repressive pathology. Expecting immediate retribution for their transgression (it is strange that

both Richard R. Bozorth and Gregory Woods neglect to discuss the poem, in this regard) the serene aftermath of the erotic encounter provides instead the recognition of self-sovereignty that the mundane had denied or concealed. Time had been the servant of the condemning forces implied by the lyric; here it reveals itself as an ally to the lovers:

But morning let us pass
And day by day relief
Outgrew his nervous laugh;
Grows credulous of peace

The semi-colon heralds the alteration of the lyric's balance, as recollection is supplanted by the sheer present, and considerations of what has been are discarded for reflection on what is. But "Grows *credulous* of peace" strikes a note of caution: the lyric voice, for all its optimism, still speaks from territory where credulity can be punished. Consequently then, the final stanza - with its imagery of the lovers' psycho-geography - reclaims a poetic arcadia to reaffirm the feeling of triumph, however momentary. The voice of "That night when joy began" engages with lyric history and lyric convention as a way of insulating the lovers. The space of the poem – the freedom afforded the speaker in conveying the erotic through the aesthetic – constitutes an alternative space, an alternative history, and an alternative present, as the shift to the present tense suggests. Furthermore, the concatenation of imagery evinced by the lyric – from preoccupation with time (night, darkness) to the inhabitation of space (day, light) – corresponds with this empowerment, this possession: "And love's best glasses reach / No fields but are his own."

Brought out into the light from its illicit beginnings in the dark, the erotic encounter brings time and space into unity with one another: the vagaries of time cannot impinge on the lovers (hence the "relief"), and they exist in their own sacred space. To expand and to humanise the lyric at its close, Auden balances this profundity with the beautifully judged homeliness of "love's best glasses" which finds familiarity in the reader's response. The intimacy of the monodic solo voice welcomes us at this point into the secret space of love, rather than chiding us for our distance from it. In "That night when joy began", the communicative potential of the aesthetic is invested anew, making of its readers a sensitive, concurring community.

This is a corrective form of exposure, then: one in which the private sensual experience can be ratified and its fragility preserved.

“Enter with him”: December 1931. *The English Auden*, 114.

The precision of the love lyric’s temporality – its transient and unrepeatable significance to its implied speaker in the moment – leads Auden into intriguing aesthetic avenues. Much of the poignancy of a lyric such as “Enter with him”, and much of its critical interest, derives from this closing window of expressive opportunity. The intensity of feeling and its aesthetic realisation are heightened by the awareness of a common threat: fragile as they are, both must necessarily end. “Enter with him” compounds this sense of a time within time, a time unfettered by chronology, which the love lyric must finally relinquish so that the travails of normal chronological time can be resumed. The lyric draws us into the moment of its utterance, and love’s moment exists and perishes alongside it. Love and the aesthetic itself are cousins in this way, each striking a different kind of impermanent ontological victory against the routines and regimens of modern consciousness. Further to this enriched time, the lyric accomplishes an astonishing duality with its dependence on the third person. Purportedly observational, being a minor narrative about “him”, it nevertheless unfolds with coruscating personal force. This lyrical tactic has been understood as a demonstration of Auden’s gay poetic identity – as evidence of his obligation to conceal²¹⁵ - but such theses avoid the interest of how such concealment (whether motivated along those lines or not: I would question the degree of concealment in a love lyric preoccupied with “him”) effectively creates a new order of aesthetic consciousness. As we read it then, the lyric is Janus-faced from its core, untraceable even to the time of “I” and “you” – to an identifiable personal history – yet it is a poem absolutely of its moment, thriving on the occasion of its writing. Assumptions proliferate: assumed autobiography, assumed sexual orientation, assumed poetic calculation. “Enter with him” is a lyric that feeds, and feeds upon, our

²¹⁵ Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, (168): “He [Auden] would systematically cover up the origins of his poems, by referring to a lover as the genderless “you”, and by adding misleading dedications and facetious titles to what began as love poems.”

interpretative assumptions, registering a personal intensity that all the while takes account of the reader-voyeur in its hesitancy and restraint.

It is interesting that in its first incarnation “Enter with him” was included as a choral piece in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, given that on the page, the presence of a lone singing voice is insinuated from the beginning.²¹⁶ Once again, as readers we are eavesdroppers, whose role is to refine the singularity of the love experience through our estrangement from it. Perhaps the lyric does retain the vestiges of its theatrical life: in a communicative openness affined to drama, the lyric voice occupies both our own mode of observation and the revealed truth of the experience of love – both the outer sphere of readerly detachment, and the inner chamber of loving anguish, never settling in either.

The opening of the lyric performs an invocation of love with short, clipped lines bearing strong end-stresses. The certainty of pace (established by the dimeter, and the syntactical clarity of the lines) is offset by a sense of latent anguish, a note of unspoken pain owing to the absence of the beloved:

Enter with him
These legends, love,
For him assume
Each diverse form
As legend simple
As legend queer
That he may do
What these require
Be, love, like him
To legend true.

This regularity of expression is a mere consolation prize, because love is charged with an impossible task here: to presence the lovers for each other when they are apart. Not only the temporality of love but, again, physical longing are manifest in the aesthetic. “These legends”, and the imagery of legends described in the second stanza, represent all the life that unfolds in lieu of physical union. Set against the speaker’s bodily confinement is the protean fluidity of legendary love, ever-changing, ever-adaptable,

²¹⁶ W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *The Dog Beneath the Skin, or, Where is Francis?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), 26-8. The piece is addressed to the questing Alan Norman by the Semi-Chorus (verse 1), Semi Chorus II (verse 2) and Chorus (verse 3).

free of corporeal chains. Love is also invoked as a mainstay against the unpredictable: “Be, love, like him / To legend true”; yet love and legends, the legends of love, instruct us in nothing but the unpredictable, and our own powerlessness. In what we expect of it, in the type of legends which it propounds, love must typify two opposed extremes. It must example at their most lucid both constancy (we will always love each other) and transience (our love must necessarily end, and the geography of my inner life change entirely).

“Enter with him” takes place at this vanishing point. Over the course of the poem, the window of expression closes, and constancy gives way to transience. With the lovers parted, love ushers the absent beloved into his new life: the speaker’s concerns over “his” physical safety (“And when across / The livid marsh”) become concerns of sexual jealousy: of the potential for betrayal that the physicality of the poem cannot avoid (“Between his thighs / As pony rise / As swift as wind / Bear him away...”). As the lyric draws to a close, the cord of love is severed where earlier it had joined the parted. The perverse awareness of physicality in separation goes into abeyance, and the beloved is active for the first time rather than passive:

But when at last
These dangers past
His grown desire
Of legends tire
O then, love, standing
At legends’ ending,
Claim your reward
Submit your neck
To the ungrateful stroke
Of his reluctant sword
That starting back
His eyes may look
Amazed on you
Find what he wanted
Is faithful too
But disenchanted
Your simplest love.

The “grown desire” is proof of the beloved’s sovereignty away from the relationship, as though in union the lover is something other, something not definably human, a

beautiful blank. This is where normal chronology reappears, where normality re-emerges victorious over the dizzying blindness of love. At this point Auden marshals the lyric adroitly, making it enact the qualitative change in the character of love. Love-as-experience evolves, or devolves, through the motif of sacrifice, into love-as-memory (“That starting back / His eyes may look / Amazed on you”). Now it is “disenchanted”: remembered, not felt. “Your simplest love” is only expressible posthumously. “Enter with him” captures the fraught emotional logic whereby what *is* felt becomes what *was* felt. In its poise and certainty, from the start the lyric was an act of memory striving for the status of invocation: a form of language which faces down the impossibility of changing what has passed.

“The chimneys are smoking, the crocus is out on the border”: April 1932.

The English Auden, 116-118.

Those of Auden’s love lyrics, such as those recounted above, which foreground the event of love, are balanced at this stage of his work by the more discursive, philosophically elaborate lyric-as-dissertation. In the latter works the event of love is contextualised for its historical import. “The chimneys are smoking” is one such example of this kind of sustained meditation, in which the lyric voice is interwoven with a contemplative, narrative stance, speaking of a discrete personal situation with explicit reference to its social conditioning. A lyric poetry of enquiry arises from the contest between cultural determination and subjective experience. As such the quality of poetic language gives rise to a different order of difficulty, where the challenge of the poem is to follow its meandering discursive flow: to consider its conceptual milieu rather than refine the feeling of distanced proximity attested in the poem by our response.

“The chimneys are smoking” asks, how can my relationship with others, my being one amongst many, be given and yet be felt as isolating? In what sense are we together at all? Here the love experience is avowedly unique, non-transposable, irreducibly the speakers; and in the scheme of the poem it acquires a suggestion of the gay experience. Yet on the discursive level the work concerns itself with the viability

of a *sensus communis* founded on the principles of the poetic imagination; that is, in which the lives of others and the lovers themselves are brought into a mutually determined, symbolic relationship. This is not offered as a prescription for an alternative social order, but simply the aesthetic consciousness spilling over into the speaker's understanding of "the social" in Arendt's sense: a happy advantage is made of the collapse of public and private experiences.

It begins:

The chimneys are smoking, the crocus is out on the border;
The mountain ranges are massive in the blue March day;
Like a sea god the political orator lands at the pier;
 But, O, my magnet, my pomp, my beauty
 More telling to heart than the sea,
 Than Europe or my own home town
 To-day is parted from me
 And I stand on our world alone.

The present tense affirmed at the opening, the sense of sleepy completion and calm evoked by the "blue March day" and the speaker's final indifference to the initially impressive political orator ("Like a sea god") combine to rehearse a conventional rhetorical mode: that everything is secondary to the beloved's absence ("But O, my magnet, my pomp, my beauty / More telling to heart than the sea..."). Yet the substance of the lyric henceforth actually refuses to accept this situation; its expression of love is bound up entirely with the paradox introduced at the end of the first stanza: "And I stand on *our world alone*." More than just an afterthought to the bereft speaker, the scenery around him intrudes onto the character of his love. I read the first person plural here as encapsulating the fundamental antinomy of the lyric: "our" refers not only to the lovers as a unit apart from the rest, but to all those who partake of the historical moment, in opposition (or assumed opposition) to the lovers. The image of the hawk looking "down on us all" in the second stanza intimates this. The "desert" the hawk arrives from represents all the immensity of nature, of time and space, all that does not countenance the human experience. Contrariwise, in this bleak premise the human finds definition ("Our kindness is hid...").

In seeking to describe the specifically human, the speaker meditates on the stratum of life – the “game” that is in progress – that the hawk’s unfeeling geometry cannot register. But in this stratum itself a mystery abounds: the “carried thing / Divided in secret among us” of the third stanza: or, the problem of how to compound the human experience into a commonality capable of being felt and marshalled. Only love can avail the speaker of anything like this (“Gave us... / Pieces that fit, / Whereat with love we trembled”). In a manner that recalls Spender’s “Not to you” (by way of riposte)²¹⁷, Auden’s speaker is fully aware that nature is arbitrarily meaningful now, a backdrop for human projection:

Last week we embraced on the dunes and thought they were pleased;
Now lakes and holes in the mountains remind us of error,
Strolling in the valley we are uncertain of the trees:
 Their shadow falls upon us;
 Are they spies on the human heart
 Motionless, tense in the hope
 Of catching us out? Are they hostile, apart
 From the beloved group?

In its questions (“Are they spies on the human heart”) the plaintive lyric voice employed here elides its own self-address with an implicit address to the reader – hence, to all those external to the poem’s world (Gregory Woods reads this separation as primarily sexual).²¹⁸ Aligned with the grain of the poem’s tone, this is fairly innocuous, but the questioning mode represents a qualitative shift from internality to externality, which W. R. Johnson deems at odds with the “meditative” form.²¹⁹ Auden’s version of the meditative voice consistently vies with this communicative divide, breaching it with subtle alterations of register which, as exemplified here, do not obtrude as preconceived tactics, but rather unfold as the continuation of an aesthetic logic allied to a philosophical enquiry. Hence the speaker has the implicit confidence to address an audience by proxy, informing us of a vaunted community (“Which for the masters of harbours, the colliers, and us...”), albeit one united only in their shared

²¹⁷ “Not to you I sighed. No, not a word. / We climbed together. Any feeling was / Formed with the hills. It was like trees’ unheard / And monumental sign of country peace.” Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems 1928-1985* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 27.

²¹⁸ Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 181.

²¹⁹ W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric*, 7-8.

experience of subjective disunity (“For our hour of unity makes us aware of two worlds:”).

At this point, the societal force of opposition to the lovers is condensed down into one abstract figure, “the white death”. Auden’s speaker feels a qualified affinity to those with whom he shares an immediate environment, but that qualification produces “the white death” as its excess, representing a means to manage the lovers almost for public consumption: to normalise by sensationalising them, as the mini-narrative of the “private saga” suggests,

Yes, the white death, friendless, has his own idea of us;
We’re something far more exciting than just friends.
He has his private saga he tells himself at night,
Which starts with the handsome couple
Estranged by a mistake,
Follows their lifetime curses,
Ends with the fruitless rescue from the lake,
Their death-bed kisses.

Again, according to the poem’s contrary emotional logic, this is the measure of a negative commonality, as the white death presides over all human affairs (“His eye is on all these people about us, leading / Their quiet horrified lives;”). The white death bears the brand of the speaker’s pathology then, but its influence extends further. It comprises another of Auden’s gestalt entities; from the disparate elements of modernity the poetic imagination makes a “private saga” which aims for public applicability.

Consequently we might even read the denouement of “The chimneys are smoking” as a self-reflexive commentary on the value of poetry along with its limitations. In the penultimate stanza’s account of the frustration of the lovers’ desire (their love which “cannot take that route which is straightest”), there is a parallel communicative frustration applying to the lyric itself, which must translate its own mode of address to the “millions”, to the norm who “May, by circumstance linked, / More clearly act our thought.” In the final convolution of emotional logic this separation of the lovers from the rest of society, and, perhaps, the separation of the

poem from any applicable purpose in the public realm, comes to occasion “joy”. Auden’s speaker finds in the constrictions of modern life the impetus to live fully, to “dance” with the “boatmen, virgins, and camera-men.” The joy “Is quick, is real”; quick in the sense of alive, and in the sense of speed. Love in the modern has this rapidity as its essence, transforming its conditions and boundaries into stimuli. So a version of the Good Life is sketched by the meandering voice of “The chimneys are smoking”, as it imagines the most apposite way to live amidst the insecurity and confusion of the modern.

“Out on the lawn I lie in bed”: June 1933. *The English Auden*, 136-138.

In this highly significant poem Auden’s lyric acquires its mature balance, synthesising the concatenation of thought with the pure sensory effulgence of the speaking voice. Here he finds the most amenable lyrical mode with which to expound the terms of a possible communal life, while remaining aware of the difficulties in transposing the personal experience to the historical general. In terms of form “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” benefits from its use of economical sestets which gesture appreciably towards ballad (the full rhymes of the *aabccb* scheme, which Fuller notices is taken from Smart’s “Song to David”, compound this).²²⁰ We might call this a rational ballad, however. The air it evokes, its clauses proceeding rationally as argument, each stanza being lent an air of self-standing finality by arch rhymed quatrains, is in marked contrast to the voice speaking the erotic. The expression of Agape rather than Eros requires an alteration in the voice, and in the dynamic of how we read.²²¹ The poise

²²⁰ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 149.

²²¹ Irving Singer reminds us that in its strictest sense agape is effectively the condition of Godhead: “In its own way, agapē is the reverse of nomos. Through nomos man loves God in a total commitment of the self. Through agapē God loves man (and everything else) in a free bestowal of unlimited goodness. Agapē precedes man’s love and excels it in every respect. Agapē is God giving himself, descending as the gentle rain from heaven, in acts of love that man reciprocates by renouncing the will. As the bond that establishes a fellowship between divine and human, agapē creates philia. As the ultimate fact about the universe, agapē makes eros possible....It may possess a man, but it cannot be possessed by him.” *The Nature of Love I: Plato to Luther*, 2nd. Ed (London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 269-270. The lyric moment of agape we encounter in “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” comprises such a possession, and represents the heart of the modern lyric project as a version of the question “who am I with” (where the answer is, part of a collective capable of mutual recognition). This lyric is a strong example of a spiritually inflected monody in this sense, bearing an individuated voice which is given cohesion only through the recognition of its conditioning mutual involvement.

and even pace of this poem are early indicators of Auden's public concerns, but tellingly the poem begins with an act of self-placement.

This is immediately apparent in the opening location of the speaker ("Out on the lawn I lie in bed, / Vega conspicuous overhead / In the windless nights of June;"), who has, as it were, left the confines of his room, shunning distanced analysis for direct involvement. The witty implausibility of the opening line (though as Mendelson records, sleeping outside was actually a habit of Auden's at the time)²²² is born of a deeper sense of safety and contented integration into one's surroundings ("Forests of green have done complete / The day's activity; my feet / Point to the rising moon."). For the moment this translates into an unquestioning shrug of the shoulders as regards the wider question of how the speaker came to be here, now, and how he came to do what he is doing ("Lucky, this point in time and space / Is chosen as my working place;"). There is as yet no imperative to pursue the question further, but the incidental detail indicates the direction the lyric will take ("...The leisured drive through a land of farms, / Are good to the newcomer"). Whether the speaker is himself the newcomer, or whether the newcomer is posed as a hypothetical stranger, the land - the "time and space" - will welcome, not constrain.

Equal with colleagues in a ring
I sit on each calm evening,
Enchanted as the flowers
The opening light draws out of hiding
From leaves with all its dove-like pleading
Its logic and powers.

The lyric is forthright in describing the nature of this confidence. "Equal with colleagues in a ring / I sit" emphatically states through its syntax that this notion of equality is felt before it is theorised. The tenor of the stanza's unaffected lyricism ("Enchanted as the flowers") speaks a reinvigoration of the mechanisms of natural similes and metaphors, captured in keening iambics ("opening light draws out of hiding / From leaves with all its dove-like pleading). In this tone Auden's speaker remains conversant with traditional lyrical configurations of self and world, insisting on their expressive gravity. Remembering Auden's distrust of the pathetic fallacy, his

²²² Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 161.

conviction in the outright estrangement of people from the natural world as evinced in “It was Easter” (“until a sudden shower / Fell willing into the grass and closed the day,”; “those duck’s indifference”), we are struck by the speaker’s belief in “the logic and powers” of the “opening light”. The powers bolster the value of memory, the lasting worth of the moment or event, and so make the temporal determinations of human life reclaimable to a degree (“That later we, though parted then / May still recall those evenings...”). On this secure basis the lyric speaker can find in this incipient togetherness the means to consider communal life in future configurations, and the searching trajectory of the poem is augmented by this intimacy.

The poem is characterised by its circumspection, then, which this combination of lyricism and oratorical direction insinuates into our response. The demands of the moment of expression give way to the demands of expression’s proper context. This is lyric reaching beyond the immediate experience. Monroe K. Spears calls “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” a “good example of the personal poem which is also topical and historical-political;”²²³ It is the monodic address which makes this simultaneity possible, taking what has been given to us (an intrinsic involvement in history, a related cultural identity) and reconciling it with what we have acquired independently (the friendships, the loves, the elements of chance which do so much to comprise the inner life):

Now North and South and East and West
Those I love lie down to rest;
The moon looks on them all:
The healers and the brilliant talkers,
The eccentrics and the silent walkers,
The dumpy and the tall.

This kind of reconciliation prefigures the Forsterian injunction that loyalty to one’s friends supersedes loyalty to any abstraction, ideology or state.²²⁴ There is warmth relayed in the speaker’s coterie of friends, suggesting that the kernel of friendship takes primacy over the ancillary theorising of human life and activity (the lyrical “I” is distinguished without recourse to the kind of dialectical individuation outlined by

²²³ Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (1963; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 150.

²²⁴ E. M. Forster, “What I believe”, *Two Cheers for Democracy*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (1951; repr., London: Abinger, 1972), 66.

Adorno in “Lyric Poetry and Society”). Fittingly, along with this simplified emphasis, the “moon” takes the place of Auden’s previous, more elaborate conceptual constructs. As the point of orientation both to the speaker’s immediate concerns (those who are loved) and to the “Churches and power stations” of all collective activity, the moon is not seen to project its constructs onto external reality, but is affixed to it. The moon, “blankly as an orphan”, stabilises reality to the speaker without simplification or distortion. Voice and song become thematically and formally consummate here: the lyric aligns I (speaker) with Us (intimates) and They (unknown others), premising an extended audience, although, as Fuller notes, the speaker seems aware that his well-fed privilege affords this moment of agape.²²⁵ Within this dynamic the speaker can consider “What violence is done” elsewhere, in the orbit of which we are all actors (even the comparatively shielded English), as stanzas excised from the *Collected Poems* edition show with less equivocation:

And now no path on which we move
 But shows already traces of
 Intentions not our own,
 Thoroughly able to achieve
 What our excitement could conceive,
 But our hands left alone.

The recognition of mutual involvement is coeval with the recognition that the individual experience takes its place as part of a composite momentum that can never be controlled, bearing “traces of / Intentions not our own”. In the rest of the quatrain the emphasis is seen to lie with the psychic contribution to this composite rather than the physical; and we note the removal of the “excited” polysyllables from the last line, “But our hands left alone”, conveying foreboding and disillusionment. The momentum is imagined as a “crumpling flood”, and the poem reaches its climax with this brilliantly judged extended metaphor which conveys the experience of the paradox of powerlessness and responsibility. The cycle of flood and retreat is inexorable, but offers a model of history which withholds a regenerative hope among its accumulated disasters:

Soon through the dykes of our content
 The crumpling flood will force a rent...

²²⁵ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 149-150.

But when the waters make retreat
And through the black mud first the wheat
In shy green stalks appears;
When stranded monsters gasping lie,
And sounds of riveting terrify
Their whorled unsubtle ears:

May this for which we dread to lose
Our privacy, need no excuse
But to that strength belong;
As through a child's rash happy cries
The drowned voices of his parents rise
In unlamenting song.

These stanzas issue a warning, incredibly prescient, to those whom (in Peter McDonald's phrase) "an embarrassment of beliefs" endemic to the thirties would make "stranded monsters" – left out "gasping" by the tide of history.²²⁶ This refers not only to the violent, to the unethical, but to those who suffer in sharing that common existence, and to those who find themselves second-guessed by history, their assumed judgement and confidence destroyed. The lyric holds the frightening gaze of the full implications of mutual determination, which reaches its experiential apex in the fleeting exhilaration of agape, in the transient moments of friendly contentment such as the one which prompted this lyric. Jealousy for the private life is no longer an option. Those episodes of communal love are the living antitheses of every act of anger or wickedness. The speaker's final plea - for that love, "All unpredicted", to "calm / The pulse of nervous nations", for it to be "Tough in its patience" - stands against all modern pseudo-prophecy, all doctrines of will which despoil the security borne by each illuminated moment. "Out on the lawn I lie in bed" hence presents us with a fluent example of the radical reinvestment of lyric possibility. Auden finds in the features specific to the lyric the means to make an invaluable intervention in the argument concerning the nature of responsible thought and action even when, publicly visible as they were, the thirties poets would run the risk of becoming "stranded monsters" themselves.

²²⁶ Peter McDonald, *Rewriting the Thirties*, 74.

“Our hunting fathers told the story”: May 1934. *The English Auden*, 151.

Tracing the evolution of love as the guiding force of the inner life and the workings of history, “Our hunting fathers told the story” condenses all the major characteristics of Auden’s early lyrics into a dense, intellectually elaborate piece. Evidently it cannot be called a love lyric in a conventional manner; love, instead, features as a concept. In terms of voice, the lyric occupies a complicated, paradoxical position. That it can be called a lyric without qualification, as Edward Callan has it,²²⁷ is due principally to its brevity. Its architecture, however - partially obscured by the suspension of full rhymes, half rhymes being preponderant instead - indicates that this is a peculiar, novel kind of lyricism. This is neither a public nor a private poem, but a clue to situating it appropriately in terms of voice might be found in John Fuller’s observation that the poem “consists of two stanzas, each of which is made up of a single sentence: the total effect is of an immensely involved couplet”.²²⁸ This grammatical anomaly is certainly an example of Steinerian tactical difficulty. I would say a further effect of the extended sentences is to deny us the time to absorb the allusions and pregnant imagery, giving the poem a hypnotic force all the more powerful when recited.

“Our hunting fathers told the story” can be called a lyric on these grounds. It conveys the singular sense of the temporal,²²⁹ even while it does not seem to speak from a clear vantage point in relation to its audience. The opening stanza’s cumulative abstract nouns brandish their own internal coherence as we attempt to divine their meaning:

Our hunting fathers told the story
Of the sadness of the creatures,
Pitied the limits and the lack
Set in their finished features;
Saw in the lion’s intolerant look,
Behind the quarry’s dying glare,
Love raging for the personal glory

²²⁷ Edward Callan, *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect* (London: Oxford, 1983), 106.

²²⁸ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 151.

²²⁹ Fuller wonders (*ibid.*) why Benjamin Britten chose to set “Our hunting fathers told the story” to music; perhaps the composer recognised something of this temporal element in selecting it for musical treatment.

That reason's gift would add,
The liberal appetite and power,
The rightness of a god.

The opening note of implication carried by the first person plural (“*Our* hunting fathers...”) seems teasingly at odds with the reluctance of the rest of the detail to demonstrate just how we are involved. So this is an attempt to estrange as much as involve: an attempt to do both at once. Again, the feeling of distanced proximity is pronounced, not in an erotic context (where we are permitted fleeting access to the sensual moment), but in an historical one. This is the story of our history, made only dimly recognisable. The compression of the lyric form is taken to the extreme, becoming conceptual compression. The expanse of human history is compressed across two ten-line stanzas. As a result the lyric voice on display is a fascinating hybrid of modes and registers.

Both Fuller and Mendelson offer convincing readings of the poem based on Auden's preoccupations at the time, particularly relating to the Victorian doctrine of evolution which viewed the other creatures of the earth as no longer capable of development (“Set in their finished features”), in contrast to human beings.²³⁰ Such readings benefit from biographical specificity, but the experience of reading the lyric is fully pronounced irrespective of such knowledge. The “story” told here may not be Victorian; indeed, the effect of the first stanza is to throw us back into human prehistory. More specifically, Auden's speaker makes of the Victorian doctrine another “story”, consigning it to myth. The opening lines pitch us, as readers, into such myths: they are ours, they are given to us, but the curious and contrary blend of mythic with anthropological registers seems to resist “our” possession of them (“Our hunting fathers *told the story / Of the sadness*” feels mythic; the clear-headed historical summary of “*Pitied the limits and the lack*” evokes a rational approach in contrast, and the lyric maintains this intriguing balance). Thus a central contradiction in the experience of history in Auden's historical moment is crystallised. Rationalism and myth are shown as an indissoluble whole.

²³⁰ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 215.

The anthropological-mythic mode is a curious blend of detached rationalism with a more intuitive recognition of the bearing of the past on the present. It is this intuitive state that the difficulties of the poem work to evoke in our response: through this difficulty we feel our own implication, distanced and yet intimate. The difficulties of “Our hunting fathers told the story” secure a distinct type of speaker-reader encounter. If, the first time we speak it, the poem appears unapproachably dense, on repeated readings the speaker’s allusive history begins to take shape, but the first response is the key. Perhaps we trouble to place the voice in terms of public or private because it is in a sense pre-political, something more archaic, as the suggestive opening line of the poem flashes upon, and which the slightly ponderous repeated formulations of conjunctions and articles across the first stanza subtly evoke (“*Of the sadness of the creatures; ...and the lack / Set in their features; Saw in the lion’s intolerant look*”; *Love raging for the personal glory; rightness of a god*”). This sense of intuitive understanding works in concert with repeated readings, when we begin to piece together the history that Auden’s speaker is describing, which is a history of love. The fathers’ love is a manner of projection (“Saw in the lion’s intolerant look”) which sanctions their hunting, their aspiration, their sense of progress which has led to the valorisation of the individual (“Love raging for the personal glory”). This material practice preceded the theory; that is, it preceded the Enlightenment understanding of the self which has shaped (British) history and the notion of individualism that supported it: “That reason’s gift would add, / The liberal appetite and power, / The rightness of a god.” But when we read, we are directly implicated in this. We too rehearse “reason’s gift” when we try to piece together the meaning of the allusions, to grasp the significance of this history as a form of estrangement. An earlier lyric had called for love to...

..make us as Newton was, who in his garden watching
The apple falling towards England, became aware
Between himself and her of an eternal tie....

“O Love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven”: May 1932.
The English Auden, 119.

“Our hunting fathers” elects to reveal the reality of that tie as it exists in modernity, as the stuff of man’s “mature ambition”. The “possible dream” of that earlier lyric, that love would manifest in the fulfilment of “actual History” (whether along Marxist lines

or otherwise) has already been realised, albeit in the dissipated form of the common historical life. The second stanza's tone is as a result noticeably more modern:

Who nurtured in that fine tradition
Predicted the result,
Guessed love by nature suited to
The intricate ways of guilt?
That human ligaments could so
His southern gestures modify,
And make it his mature ambition
To think no thought but ours,
To hunger, work illegally,
And be anonymous?

By now we appreciate that "Our hunting fathers" is an exercise in extreme condensation. The remnants of archaism co-exist with cynical modern rhetoric. Human history is being relayed as a history of love, now extant in "modified" form as the barely palpable communal sense of mass society ("To think no thoughts but ours, / To hunger, work illegally, / And be anonymous?"). Nicholas Jenkins has recorded that these last lines, which Auden assumed were the words of Lenin, were actually those of his widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya.²³¹ This, and the wider Communist source, has little bearing on the poem as we read it. For this reason John Fuller's gloss of the poem needs to be supplemented.²³² These lines, on the brink of being non-sequiturs when taken out of their original context, describe the terminus of the spirit of love in modernity. Love has become a word for rootless commonality ("no thought but ours"), describing longing ("To hunger"), an ineffable sense of the clandestine ("work illegally"), and the anonymous social life. But the tone of the lyric is never resolved into a general statement of complaint; those questions are too vague to be truly rhetorical. Herein lies the true value of the poem. "Our hunting fathers" defeats all attempts at paraphrase; there is never the sense, when speaking it, that one's thought-process could be fully relayed to another. It is a poem that jealously guards the discreteness of its power of address.

As a result "Our hunting fathers" is a fine example of one aspect of Auden's singularity; that is, it becomes urgently speakable precisely because it does not seem

²³¹ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 151.

²³² Fuller writes (*ibid.*), "The stanzas contrast reason's collaboration with reason's modification, individualism with collectivism, Victorian *laissez-faire* with the Communist revolution."

to have a proper habitat, either in our subjective response or within a public dialogue. It is *sui generis*, and creates a new way of conveying the placelessness of poetic expression in modernity, an expression which finds the urgency to communicate from disparate, conflicting sources. In a difficult poem such as this the lyric is the still centre, encircled by the chaotic and hazardous processes of establishing comprehension. In this sense the lyric represents a gesture of permanence, precisely because of its tactical elusiveness. The barely navigable flux of stimuli seen to characterise modern industrial life finds echoes in the interpretative process itself. This is poetry overtly contiguous with the conditions for thinking during its times, and Auden's by now well-acknowledged ease with the terms of twentieth century modernity finds its most profound expression here, in the reading process that works like "Our hunting fathers" still activate.²³³ The reader of "Our hunting fathers" is pitched into a potentially endless stream of thought which leads inexorably back to the artwork, possibly tempting us to overlook the fact that it remains oriented solidly towards its historical surroundings, its conditioning reality. The pace of the lyric (in the interpretative rather than the metrical sense) can be said to belong to the reader; it is experienced by us in the rapid movement of interpretative possibilities that the voice presents. This is the essence of Auden's monody: a connection between voice and speaking reader which is perhaps most palpable in his difficult poetry. In "Our hunting fathers" our capacity to interpret looks at itself and, as it were, notices it exists: as given by the particularity of time and place. In Auden's light lyrics we will divine a parallel, complementary line of poetic possibility, where the reader partakes in the lyric's pace less exclusively, as one member of an implied collective.

²³³ Characterising the Auden group, Chris Baldick writes, "By contrast with Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, they were not inclined to bemoan the arrival of their century as a catastrophic Fall from the aristocratic glories of old into vulgar suburbanism. Suspicious of that kind of cultural nostalgia, they were more consistently modern in identifying their adversary as a moribund social order sliding into the atavistic politics of Fascism." Chris Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, 104.

Chapter Four – From Love to Lightness: Defining Auden’s Light Verse.

I – Light Verse as Chorus

Contained in Auden’s introduction to the 1938 Oxford Book of Light Verse, beneath its Eliotic thesis on the relative conditions for difficulty and for clarity in poetry, there is a series of telling remarks. These remarks encourage the inference that for Auden, the prospect of imagining an audience – one congenial to every aspect of his work, in all its tensions and contrary impulses – was especially fraught. Principally, this prospect is seen to rest upon the viability of “closeness”; that is, the proximity of the poet to his audience, the features common to their lives, the similarity of their experiences, or in Auden’s words, their “intimate relation”.²³⁴ The role of the voice in Auden’s lyric comprises the aesthetic manifestation of this fraught imagining. Monody describes our encounter with the speaker of Auden’s work in which closeness is achieved through the illustration – and at times, the activation – of those difficulties of poetic communication attendant on the rise of mass society. But what other possibilities of expression did Auden instinctively render in his lyric modes?

Before we consider these possibilities, as realised in Auden’s light verse, and before we broach a more useful definition of lightness as it applies to his work in the crucial aspect of voice, a brief discussion of the preparatory ground for Auden’s lightness is needed. I have already argued that a fully theorised account of Auden’s range is the crux of understanding the nature and value of his lyric poetry. It is the light works which complicate the positioning of Auden as an experimental high modernist, and I aim to resist the comfortable division of Auden’s work into the popular and the arcane. Instead I seek to explain both tendencies, as part of Auden’s manifold inherited sources and subsequent trajectories. The central issue might be put thus: what kind of opportunities did Auden glean from lightness? What kind of imaginative space does light verse open for the reader, and how might that space be related to, but go beyond, its historical conditions?

²³⁴ Auden, *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), xvii.

Walter Benjamin's seminal study *Charles Baudelaire - A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* contains a neat account of the perceived problems for lyric poetry as they were seen to apply in the modern age. Light verse is noticeable for its absence here; Benjamin seems tacitly to distinguish it from lyric proper:

...that the climate for lyric poetry has become increasingly inhospitable, is attested to, among other things, by three factors. In the first place, the lyric poet has ceased to represent the poet *per se*. He is no longer a "minstrel", as Lamartine still was; he has become a representative of a genre....Secondly, there has been no success on a mass scale in lyric poetry since Baudelaire...As a result, a third factor was the greater coolness of the public even towards the lyric poetry that has been handed down as part of its cultural heritage.

...it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers. This may be due to a change in the structure of their experience.²³⁵

The presentation of the communicative freedoms tapped by Auden's monodic poetry demonstrated that a modified kind of rapport between the poet and his audience was in fact generated within the conditions of mass media. To Benjamin's first point, we might give qualified assent: certainly the notoriety of Pound's *Cantos*, and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for instance, displaced the idea of lyric as a synecdoche for all poetry amongst the cognoscenti at least, yet it must be added that the allotted roles of poets, or their assumed titles, may indeed have lost all fixity. The two subsequent points also need to be qualified with reference to Anglo-American poetry; Yeats clearly had some degree of success in lyric poetry, whether defined in artistic or commercial terms, and the English poetry reading public remained relatively immune to the appeal of experimental modernist verse, as the continued popularity of Hardy, Housman and the Georgian poets illustrated.²³⁶ Yet, as we have discussed in other contexts, Benjamin's central premise - that the climate for lyric poetry has undergone radical changes in the modern age - is indisputable. Benjamin is working with a distinctive understanding of lyric, one which, with Baudelaire as its avatar, configures the form more appreciably in line with what I have called monody. This is to say, he focuses on the solo voice and records, with Baudelaire taking centre stage, the incursions of mass society

²³⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), 109-110.

²³⁶ Chris Baldick, *The Modern Movement*, 110-111. Baldick calculates that Yeats, de la Mare, Bridges, Davies, Housman and Hardy were the most anthologised poets of the thirties, with Eliot the only modernist among the highest entries.

inflicted on the version of the individual underpinning that voice. But we can argue that light verse warrants inclusion in this thesis of hostile modernity; and furthermore, the lyrical features of light verse record a different experience available within this historical paradigm, and so make possible a new way of thinking.

The question occurs, then; in what sense are light poems lyrics, if we understand the lyric as the form which modulates our encounter with the page by bringing forth our own speaking voice, as the basis of a critical moment? The light poem, we would reply, invokes a choral model of encounter and involvement. It carries a different set of presumptions about communication and commonality than the monodic-solo poem. It can be deemed lyrical in the more traditional, ancient sense: the notion of singing and performance is raised from the implicit to the explicit. In Auden's case many of the light lyrics first emerged as songs – as parts of dramatic performances - so the connection with literal speaking and singing is manifest, as in “What's in your mind, my dove, my coney” (November 1930) which first appeared in the lost play *The Fronny*.²³⁷

What's in your mind, my dove, my coney;
Do thoughts grow like feathers, the dead end of life;
Is it making of love or counting of money,
Or raid on the jewels, the plans of a thief?
The English Auden, 56.

The term lyric has a conventional generic application to such works in the sense that they are song-lyrics (Chapter Six will look at the question of song for Auden, according to a non-generic understanding). But this straightforward offering of lyric's bases in song dovetails in light verse with a historically vital manner of access, which possesses a vitality that I have attributed to the lyric form in the revised sense. Auden's light verse requires inclusion as a strain of modern revised lyric on this basis. Through the choral voice of light verse we are aware of the immediate and unqualified notion of clear placement within a collective, even when the subject-matter of the poem may not possess a discursive or polemic force (though we will see

²³⁷ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 80.

that it can). In short, we can call Auden's light verse lyrics in the revised sense as well as the traditional because how we read is as important as what we read.

Considering the importance of this ease of access we find in light verse, we note that a number of Auden's light lyrics comprise the fulfilment of certain wishes of earlier modernism, as well as the refutation of its hidebound assumptions and tactical exclusions. Following the apex of early modernism, held in works such as the *Cantos* and *The Waste Land*, there is an acknowledgement amongst serious discursive poets - sometimes tacit, sometimes, as we saw with Eliot, quite open - that the territory of the lyric has been curtailed by other media. But in the thirties the levelling of discourse, which paradoxically increases the scope for lyric address, clears many of the avenues assumed blocked by the preceding generation. More specifically, the increasing saturation of the poetic consciousness by the influences of mass media lends a greater significance to light verse, and it is in this context that Auden's work (and the political tone of his introduction to the Oxford volume) needs to be understood. We have seen previously how Auden's generation responded to increased media exposure, to the curious pressures of public self-exposition determined by political barometers. Another fairly obvious, but no less vital factor is the prominence of entertainment, shaped by the growth of cinema and radio.²³⁸ Entertainment - or the intention to entertain according to the example of the more immediate, collective, forms of film and spoken word - becomes the lever which decreases the distance between artist and audience, and this need not entail an attenuation of artistic value. We are more concerned with the space and shape of poetic communication in the thirties; once again, it is the contiguity of industrialised mass culture with lyric poetry that informs and supports Auden's light verse. Perhaps the bifurcation of difficult and light we see in Auden's poetry has its prose analogue in the works of his contemporary, Graham Greene, who calculatedly divided his output in terms of "entertainments" and serious novels.²³⁹ For the poet Auden, this situation was personally congenial because of his familiarity with the heritage of light verse, which lent to him the modes and stances required to communicate at an impersonal, accessible level. And yet the modified

²³⁸ Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, 107.

²³⁹ By the publication of *Another Time*, Auden partitioned his more conventional attempts at light verse from the rest of his poetry. *Another Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940).

gravity of that communication - its historical significance in the context of thirties culture – intensified its importance.

Where Greene openly declared his interest in the remunerative potential of entertainment, for a poet such potential did not exist to the same degree. However, just as with difficult poetry, the paradigm of mass production profit-centrism undoubtedly coloured the creation of modern light verse, in the sense that within this paradigm an audience might cohere in the mind of the artist: vexatious questions about the dislocation of poet from reader could be put aside. With its unquestioning assumption of a readership bound by a common collection of cultural reference points, light verse finds the conditions to evolve in twentieth century modernity in a way that can be clearly plotted. Those unquestioning assumptions are vivified in the confined imaginative spaces of mass society, encouraged by the unclear distinction between public and private realms and the new sense of cultural and geographical proximity characterising mass communication. In the mid thirties Auden produces light verse songs whose debt to American songwriters such as Cole Porter has been amply acknowledged:²⁴⁰

Some talk of Alexander
And some of Fred Astaire,
Some like their heroes hairy
Some like them debonair,
Some prefer a curate
And some an A. D. C.,
Some like a tough to treat `em rough,
But you're my cup of tea.

“The Soldier loves his rifle”: March 1936
The English Auden, 160.

Rather than becoming mired in points of conditions, influences and classifications, it is preferable to remain with the poetry itself and consider how the voices and poetics of Auden’s light lyrics work with this assumption of commonality. We begin to observe that the importance of light verse lies in its exemption from the interminable debates of the modernist period regarding aesthetics. Reference was made earlier to

²⁴⁰ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 2; 77. Other influences are present here: the first line is lifted from the famous military song, “The British Grenadiers”.

the staunchly oppositional tendencies of the preceding generation of modernists such as those belonging to the Bloomsbury group, to whom aesthetics, in contrast to the spiritually corrupt principle of objectifiable profit, was necessarily exclusive.²⁴¹ In contrast Auden's light verse, as Stan Smith has recently argued, carries a "democratic, levelling impetus";²⁴² and the energy powering this impetus is the lyric voice, freed to encompass the local-particular and the historical-general in the same stanza. The comic treatment of reality, which forms the lifeblood of light verse, is premised on the mutuality of all experiences. The attraction of the voice of a poem like "Letter to Lord Byron", which will be examined in greater depth later in this chapter, lies in the manner that Auden balances this mutuality with promiscuous references to the personal or recondite:

I read that there's a boomlet on in Birmingham,
 But what I hear is not so reassuring;
 Rumours of War, the B.B.C confirming 'em,
 The prospects for the future aren't alluring;
 No-one believes Prosperity enduring,
 Not even the Wykehamists, whose golden mean
 Maintains the All Souls Parish Magazine.

The English Auden, 197.

Even at such (autobiographical) times the reader's experience can be described as choral on account of its mutual involvement with the speaking voice. That which, as present day readers, we do not share with the speaker in terms of precise history, we partake of the worldview that he makes available. The choral lyric is defined not primarily by its first person plural, but by the way that its voice ensures its utterances are speakable, and that the worldview is readily adoptable. As such, Auden's choral lyrics present a vision of the civic life unfettered by division and irreconcilably particular experiences. The monodic lyric voice reclaims, with the speaking reader, the modern private realm from subjective isolation by demonstrating the anteriority of interrelationships, or the prior conditions of collective involvement the underpin all expressions of individuality. In monody this recognition, presented to us more forcibly through actual speech, counterbalances the distance from the experience related in the lyric; the colloquy of voices brings this collective involvement into

²⁴¹ D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture For Democracy*, 129.

²⁴² Stan Smith, "Auden's light and serio-comic verse", *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, 101.

focus. The choral counterpart is simpler; it annexes a version of the public realm from the confusion of the social, in which the individual voice speaks the general experience alongside the particular.

How is this so? Moreover, if we bestow a philosophical weight onto light verse, do we jeopardise its value? Certainly Auden's own thoughts on this matter throughout his career would argue against freighting his light verse with concerns exterior to its own poetics, which, he contended, should be "simple, clear, and gay".²⁴³ But there is a balance we can strike between recognising the spirit of light verse and putting that spirit into a significant context: something which Auden's introduction to the Oxford Book attempts to do with its potted history of the form and the sociological theory that runs alongside it. To explain the spirit of light verse we need to explain in more detail how we respond to it as readers. In contrast to the monodic lyric, light verse presents a closed circuit of meaning, in a way that prefigures (and, in the twentieth century, converges with) the innovations of mass society entertainments. It is, so far as a poem can be, non-negotiable: its intent is writ large in its techniques, its ironies are inclusive (even where, as in many of these examples, the poem could be called "gay" in the modern sense); and as readers we chime with it to produce the choral moment:

Some say that Love's a little boy
And some say he's a bird,
Some say he makes the world go round
And some say that's absurd:
But when I asked the man next door
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife was very cross indeed
And said it wouldn't do.

"Some say that Love's a little boy": January 1938
The English Auden, 134.

This simplicity is essential to the public qualities of light verse, something so obvious as to appear unremarkable, but which has not been properly addressed in critical

²⁴³ Auden, *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, xx.

accounts of Auden.²⁴⁴ In the specific context of the thirties such simplicity has increased force. Accessible but not disposable, inclusive rather than exclusive, Auden's light verse possesses a vitality that fulfils Ford Madox Ford's 1919 vision of what Michael Levenson calls "civic realism", where "the artist assumes...the responsibilities of citizenship in the modern world,...the artist's goal is to reflect contemporaneity,".²⁴⁵ Less a manner of avoiding the claims of responsibility in the thirties, light verse is more a way of reconfiguring the notion of responsibility by invoking the choral voice. Here we remember from the previous chapter the fundamental question about historical existence asked by Heidegger – that of "mitsein": who am I with, at this time, in this place, and how am I with them? The choral voice assumes that the speaker is one among many, and that the speaking reader shares in the experience of common placement among others. In this sense Auden's work confirms that the collapse of strongly demarcated public and private realms can offer a tonic to light verse. The choral voice is inspired by the dynamics of mass communication, but such that it challenges notions of atomism and deracination. A shared experience is utterable, and Auden's light lyrics use the conventional touchstones of light verse – humour, ease of access, a heightened speed of reading and comprehension – in the context of twentieth century modernity. Auden's sensitivity to this context meant that such techniques frequently bled into his more discursive lyrics, creating, as Anthony Hecht has it, hybrid lyric of redoubled significance.²⁴⁶ Hence we can use the term "lightness" to describe features and effects of many lyrics, rather than restrict discussion to dry classifications.

The evidence presented by his own work would seem to undermine Auden's arguments in the Oxford book. His inclusions in that volume, and by extension his working understanding of the genre of light verse, are classified thus;

²⁴⁴ What Edward Mendelson calls "public verse" (*Early Auden*, 207), in light of Auden's introduction to the Oxford Book, can be conceptualised as "light verse" if we understand "lightness" as a stance – as an attitude with its complementary poetics – that becomes central to Auden in the mid-thirties. I will demonstrate that "publicness" is the result of a conditioning lightness. Anthony Hecht warns against raising Auden's remark, "I think poetry is fundamentally frivolity", to the level of doctrine (*The Hidden Law*, 175-77); I agree, but we should not underestimate the strength, or variety, of the tendency toward lightness in Auden's work, as distinct from "frivolity."

²⁴⁵ Michael H. Levenson, *The Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 108.

²⁴⁶ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 12.

- 1) Poetry written for performance, to be spoken or sung before an audience (e.g. folk songs, the poems of Tom Moore)
- 2) Poetry intended to be read, but having for its subject matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as ordinary human being (e.g. Chaucer, Pope, Byron)
- 3) Such nonsense poetry as, through its properties and techniques, has a general appeal (Nursery Rhymes, the poems of Edward Lear.²⁴⁷

In 1937, the year preceding his editorship of the volume, Auden had written a number of lyrics in which the implied element of performance is paramount. That they can be deemed examples of a new kind of light verse will be demonstrated by close readings: later in this chapter I will discuss two prominent examples, “As I Walked Out One Evening” and “It’s farewell to the drawing room’s civilised cry”, in isolation. Auden’s editorship of the volume compounded a pivotal aspect of his poetic identity, ever-present since his juvenilia, but which comes to full artistic significance in the mid thirties. Emerging from the choral experiments of early works such as “It’s no use raising a shout” is a poetry of a different kind of pace and address. Steeped in the tradition of light verse, it is attuned to the standing of modern subjects toward each other in the inchoate space of twentieth century public life. As such it will be predicated upon “closeness” and proximity, but will take these conditions for granted rather than, as in its monodic counterpart, interrogating them. In an unpremeditated way, Auden’s first point given above, detailing a poetry written for performance becomes the basis for his own poetics, with the quality of performance recalibrated to minimise the distance between poetic utterance and interpretation.

Remaining with the Oxford book briefly, we can observe the sound Eliotic principles underpinning Auden’s conception of light verse sitting rather uneasily alongside his avowed leftism; but, more significantly, we can discern an account of his own anxieties as a light poet. Those anxieties seem to prefigure Adorno’s wariness of false immediacy, which is, superficially, precisely what light verse offers:

Lightness is a great virtue, but light verse tends to be conventional, to accept the attitudes of the society in which it is written. The more homogeneous a society, the closer the artist is to the everyday life of

²⁴⁷ Auden, *ibid.*, ix.

his time, the easier it is for him to communicate what he perceives, but the harder for him to see honestly and truthfully, unbiased by the conventional responses of his time.²⁴⁸

We could say that Auden effectively seeks to harness this antithesis in his own work, with the caveat that the introduction cannot be taken as a watertight self-account. We recall the new social imperatives fostered by the thirties poets: their polemical thrust, their emphasis on clarity of vision with regard to the functioning of the social body. In Auden's introduction he is palpably suspicious, good socialist that he was, of any ease of expression which may bespeak the "conventional", which may be paying lip service to the status quo. Politically (and this is important because it bears on the nature of some of his light verse directly, at the level of polemical intent) Auden could never have pronounced the England of the thirties a homogeneous society in the sense of being "both integrated and free".²⁴⁹ We noted previously how the blossoming of mass media brought the iniquities of English life into focus, and how literary life was increasingly drawn along lines determined by this cultural shift (in 1937, for example, Victor Gollancz had published Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a high water-mark of polemical socialism). But perhaps we have to demur from Auden's politico-critical judgement here in order to properly establish the context for his poetry (Edward Mendelson contends that in any case, Auden "did not entirely believe his own argument" in the Oxford Book).²⁵⁰

Auden's critical equation is simple: light verse in the purest sense is only possible for poets fully integrated and comfortable in their society, and no poet of conscience could declare himself such in the thirties, ergo, the conditions for light verse are presently unfavourable. Yet Auden's most significant work of the mid-thirties can be called light, as distinguished from his earlier difficult works, because of the different kind of immediacy of its address, often but not exclusively marshalled to the service of polemical intent. Homogeneity, when we consider it from another angle, is more pliant than Auden's political usage of the term may permit. Defined as "of the same kind of nature, having the constituent elements similar throughout",²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Auden, *ibid.*, x-xi.

²⁴⁹ Auden, *ibid.*, xx.

²⁵⁰ Edward Mendelson, "Light and Outrageous", *The New York Review of Books*: v.51 no.13 (August, 2004), 53.

²⁵¹ Definitions given in *The Chambers Dictionary*, 9th Edition.

the word “homogeneous” is best applied to a body politic advisedly; the structure of society need not be homogeneous in being politically secure (in, for instance, the way in which the feudal society of Chaucer or mercantile capitalist society of Byron were perceived to be by Auden) for there to exist a bedrock of common experience and perceptions which would support successful light verse. (It is debatable, of course, whether a society both integrated and free has ever existed in England at all, in the sense Auden implies.) Light verse - involving humour, topical reference, an instinctual feel for the personality types of an age with their mores and quandaries - can surely flourish when other factors engender other types of homogeneity.

In this case, the combination of mass media saturation and a political situation popularly understood, particularly from the mid thirties onwards, as one of impending disaster, supported just the kind of grounding from which a sense of commonality could be grasped. This sense of loss or, increasingly, of doom, grounds the expression of lightness to Auden. His light verse is manifestly post-October 1929, made all the more palpable in a piece such as “O what is that sound which so thrills the ear”, whose ominous portents are sharpened into a paradoxically contemporary shape by the traditional ballad quatrains:

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
 Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
 Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
 The soldiers coming.
The English Auden, 125.

Doom and loss are the principles of commonality, the shared fate of the societies of the European Enlightenment. In this sense Auden’s light lyric is conditioned in part by the emergence of totalitarianism, which sought to impose on its peoples a travestied version of the common experience, using behaviourism as its tool. Again, it is Orwell who offered the most urgent synopsis of this danger in *Homage to Catalonia*, which professedly aimed to expose the totalitarian destruction of the foundations of historical truth: to attack its clear agenda, in which the British left-wing press were complicit, to destroy the grounds for mutual intelligibility.²⁵²

²⁵² George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia, Orwell’s Spain* (London: Penguin, 2001). Orwell writes of his own compromised objectivity (199): “It is very difficult to write accurately about the Spanish war,

Similarly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith is given “the book”: the last surviving account of history before Big Brother effectively eradicated it. The author of the book, (the possibly non-existent) Emmanuel Goldstein, reflects on the death of the Enlightenment in the thirties: “The earthly paradise had been discredited at exactly the moment when it became realizable.”²⁵³ From total possibility to total catastrophe: this is the nature of the loss which creates the homogeneity sustaining light lyrics such as “As I walked out this evening”, over which lurks the spectre of conflict and state coercion.

Of course, Auden’s concerns about the apolitical quality of traditional light verse are instructive. By invoking an idea of the collective experience, and not being bound to any imperatives of historical veracity, light verse could be symptomatic of a wider quietism, false immediacy, or worse, a refusal to be “responsible” in the face of the totalitarian threat. According to its thirties inflection, the word “community” is charged with potentially malign intent: the continual invocation of “volk” as an idealised racial community by the Nazis is the obvious example. Here we can discern the oppositional quality of light verse. When centred upon the recognition of mutuality light verse is an emblem of “human values”. MacNeice’s “Eclogue from Iceland”, from *Letters to Iceland* co-authored with Auden, attests that such values became indispensable in the period. The ghost of Grettir speaks to Craven and Ryan, prefiguring MacNeice’s comments in *Modern Poetry* regarding the “tiny measure” of contribution that poetry could make:

Ghost: Minute your gesture but it must be made –
 Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of
 hate,
 Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,
 Which is now your only duty.²⁵⁴

This project informs “As I walked out this evening” and other lyrics which merge a lightness of tone or form with an interrogative force, turning their attention to the

because of the lack of non-propagandist documents. I warn everyone against my bias, and I warn everyone against my mistakes. Still, I have done my best to be honest. But it will be seen that the account I have given is completely different from that which appeared in the foreign and especially the Communist press.”

²⁵³ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; repr., London: Penguin: 1970), 164.

²⁵⁴ Louis MacNeice, “Eclogue from Iceland”, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 132.

versions of public life that persist in modernity, in which the choral speaker takes an active part. Light lyric is a living endorsement of the principle of mutual intelligibility: Auden's lyrics of the mid thirties recognise the need to restate this principle and to cherish the "simple, clear and gay", as a riposte to those who would impose the will of a bogus collective on a subject people.

This notion of partaking in the choral moment needs to be stridently put. How does the reading experience become manifest as we encounter light verse? When we read and speak it, Auden's light verse has a pace that resides not in our interpretative process, as described in a difficult poem such as "Our hunting fathers", but which is patterned into the poetry itself, using prosodic features to offer an alternative stance toward the material of the poem. Consequently the experience of reading the lyric has an *external* quality: it invites the reader to partake in the lyric performance, completing the choral circuit. Auden himself would later offer another way of putting this in 1966, using the serious-comic dyad, in his introduction to the *Selected Poetry and Prose* of Byron:

In serious poetry thought, emotion, event, must always appear to dictate the diction, meter, and rhyme in which they are embodied; vice versa, in comic poetry it is the words, meter and rhyme which must appear to create the thoughts, emotions and events they require.²⁵⁵

This creation of "thoughts, emotions and events" by the prosodic features of the poem is imbued with new significance in the mid thirties. In the light lyric, just as in its difficult sibling, the reader helps define a singular event – what Auden will describe as "a way of happening" in 1939 – but here he or she is being openly invited into a performance where clarity is given in advance; it is not the vaunted end result of an interpretative process (as in "to make the need for action urgent, its nature clear"), but its precondition. The pace of the lyric exists independently of the reader, and is intuited as soon as he or she begins to engage with the lines which evoke this pace. The manic metrical waltz of "It's farewell to the drawing room's civilised cry" (January 1937), achieved through incantatory sequences of anapaests and end-stresses, is a good example:

²⁵⁵ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. W. H. Auden (London: Signet, 1966), xix.

It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilised cry,
The professor's sensible whereto and why,
The frock-coated diplomat's social aplomb,
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.
The English Auden, 208.

At such times the pace of light verse becomes directly mimetic, representing a sense of historical motion careening head-on towards disaster. Put succinctly, light verse is easy, but as Auden himself ensures us, "Light verse can be serious."²⁵⁶ In the thirties, its seriousness – its importance in illuminating the terms of communication between people as a collective – is at a premium.

Intimately related to song, frequently presenting itself as such, Auden's light verse is voiced as freely accessible, often precisely because it depends on impersonality. After the earlier excursions into difficult poetry, Auden's work of the mid thirties might be regarded as a consolidation of Eliotic principles, once more. Judged occasionally to escape his control, by F. R. Leavis among others,²⁵⁷ Auden's earlier work finds its counterpart in coolly arranged, necessarily precise light verse. The doctrinaire impersonality advocated by Eliot in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" of 1919 is, needless to say, angled towards the loftier heights of poetic expression, to what he calls "greatness"²⁵⁸ (the inverted commas are his). But the impersonality which can underscore light verse is equally adept at giving us "significant emotion" (Eliot's italics). The coda of the essay is salient here:

The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Auden, *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, ix.

²⁵⁷ Leavis praised Auden's ability in a review of the second edition of *Poems* (*Scrutiny*, June 1934), but misread the unstable power of Auden's poetic address, arguing that "As a poet he is too immediately aware of the equivocal complexity of his material, and too urgently solicited by it..." *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 140.

²⁵⁸ *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", 41.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

Or, we might add with reference to the cultural situation in the thirties, unless he is conscious of what is in the process of dying. The chain of healthy artistic succession (“conformity”) which constitutes “tradition” for Eliot, with its self-evident political preconditions, is by the mid thirties assumed to be in a state of entropy beyond rescue. But in such a context Auden’s production of light verse stands not as an anachronistic diversion from what is present – as if the poet were burying his head in the sand – but as an inspired interpretation and vivification of it, through art. The impersonal utterance is fortified by Auden’s light verse. These lyrics recognise their tradition, but instead of the secure ground of a (politically guaranteed) social milieu, they have as their basis three primary sources: the repository of received light-poetic modes and forms; the modes of mass media address still in their relative infancy (newsprint, cinema, radio); and a cultural narrative of loss and impending disaster. Auden’s light verse springs from these labile foundations. His lightness fulfils Eliot’s prescription for “greatness” in his arrangement of material – the common experience exalted, elevated into “new art emotion” – and in the significance of the manner of reading light verse, as a counterclaim to the pretensions of totalitarianism to impose the general on the particular. Here the speaking “I” is not predicated upon or confined to personal experience and, furthermore, as a kind of communication now inevitably contiguous with mass media consciousness, it is primed to invoke the general experience with renewed power. Auden redeems the standardising tendencies of modern communication, building upon the sense of communicative reach (the common understandings, the shared experiences, the traffic of information) that support those standards. His light verse is not drawn into advertising its own significance; its significance lies in how uncomplicated it is to read, and what this lack of complication may reveal about the terms of modern communal life and the potential of the lyric within it.

II - Auden's Early Lightness

The variety of Auden's output from his juvenilia onward ought to teach the critic to be wary of arbitrary distinctions and speculative taxonomies. Nevertheless, we can observe a qualitative shift as we follow Auden's career as a poet of light verse, which reaches full maturity with lyrics written in 1936 and 1937. Prior to that, Auden had consistently turned to the principles of light verse to bolster his poetic self-identity. His earliest efforts demonstrate not only the beginnings of his exceptional facility, but an intriguing sense of the farcical and the ridiculous too, employed as weapons in a generational conflict which he would go on to fight along psychological, artistic and political lines. One of his first light lyrics, "Proem" (its lyricism evident in the use of singable couplets and the straightforward invocation of the lyric "I") survives in manuscript:²⁶⁰

I tried to raise them from the dead
"Have you heard this one?" I said:
It seems it gave them some surprise
Here are some of their replies
- "You go too far" –
- "Ha ha ha ha!"
- "But aren't you rather..."
- "I'll tell my father"
- "Teach me to fly"
- "I want to cry"
- "It's like James Joyce"
- "I like your voice"
- "Tell me another"
- "You'd cure my mother"

And so it continues. The joke that cajoles and challenges; that provokes outrage and defeats apathy; as trifling as the lyric may be, it sheds interesting light on the young Auden's fantasies of literary power and the quality of his nascent ambition. There might be nothing exceptional in such ambition alone, but though the lyric is clearly too gauche to detain us for long, we might remark on its techniques: the rhyming couplets particularly, which Auden would come to master, luxuriate in their obviousness, and equally in their agile avoidance of the staid thought. More intriguing is the content: the lyric imagines a conversation which prompts an impassioned

²⁶⁰ BLMS Add 52430, 2.

response, a joke which separates its listeners into the assenters and the dissenters. Its scenario is useful, then, as a type of blueprint for sought-after immediacy: the utterance with immediate and decisive effect, which calls for no kind of reflection or interpretation. It is a fantasy of instantaneity, of face-to-face address. We will see that this imaginative motif recurs throughout Auden's mature light verse, and acquires a gravity that orientates its frivolity and deliberate excess. But, fundamentally, by imagining a conversation between the poet and his (in this case scandalised) audience, "Proem" prefigures the immediacy of the speaking voice that would come to maturity in the monodic and choral tendencies of Auden's later work. Also significant, it is Auden speaking *qua* poet. The thirties trend for anxious self-scrutiny, born of a high modernist inheritance and a partisan political climate among the young, found in Auden the poet who responded to it most variously. Not simply in the wider, adumbrating division between light and difficult, but within the oeuvre of the light verse as a distinct poetic project, we see continual alteration of voices, tones and stances, each of which puts the lyric to a different kind of use. The kind of voice present in "Proem" – the seigniorial observer, the versifier piercing hackneyed thinking and convention – colours instances of tone in many poems, but is especially predominant in "Letter to Lord Byron". To gauge the richness of that piece and others from later in the decade, however, we must first look at their earlier sources.

In the attempt to get a stronger conceptual handle on the spectrum of voices and tones in Auden's early light verse we must bear two points in mind. First, the distinction between light and difficult only really obtains at the furthest extremities of Auden's output: "Letter to Lord Byron", for instance, is manifestly, programmatically light; "Our Hunting Fathers" is by contrast manifestly difficult: syntactically abstruse, thematically nebulous, self-consciously discursive. The majority of Auden's early lyrics have a porosity of tone and imagery, making any gesture toward taxonomy a moot point. It is preferable, then, to understand Auden's lightness as a tendency – as capable of gathering itself through voice, tone, stance, or prosody – to whatever effect the poem wishes. This will allow us to include in our discussion some examples that may not obviously announce themselves as light verse, and to consider how these light elements colour our readings. Proceeding from this point, secondly we must prize clarity as a barometer of lightness. Howsoever clarity may nourish the poem – for example in the character of its voice, in its prosodic regularity, in its marked

satiric intent – it is the most salient aspect of the address of light verse. The kind of clarity we find in “We made all possible preparations”, written in December 1928, is intriguing. Voiced in an inflectionless bureaucratise and apparently a post hoc report on some kind of apocalyptic catastrophe, it carries a clear satirical intent, but Auden loosens the strictures of satire so that the tone coalesces differently. In satire we have to know who we are mocking because, as Auden put it in 1966, “The goal of satire is reform;”²⁶¹. The Ur-voice of this lyric is certainly familiar, but principally because of its neutrality. The first person plural that opens the lyric has a less coherent presence than the lyric language itself, such that its vocality strikes us first and foremost:

We made all possible preparations,
Drew up a list of firms,
Constantly revised our calculations
And allotted the farms,

The English Auden, 26.

Consequently the satiric value of the lyric is overmastered by a sense of pervasive foreboding: we look for the closed circuit of meaning which satire promises (what exactly is being criticised and needs reform?) only to find ourselves asking different questions. Who is signified by “we”, how might “we” ourselves be implicated in this disaster? The rehearsals of concepts and discourses that the voice undertakes – rationalism (“preparations”), capital (“list of firms”), precedent (“Issued all the orders expedient”), executive violence (“Chiefly against our exercising / Our old right to abuse:” – define an Enlightenment programme of civic rule. Formerly cherished as the bases of civilisation, here, in the shell-shocked regularity of cross rhymed quatrains, alternating between full rhyme and pararhyme, that programme is reduced to a litany of self-imposed mystifications. So the effect is almost that of an anti-chorus: we realise the trauma of our belonging to that opening “we” only after submitting to it. The voice continues, offering us the realisation that such mystifications are the foundations for all events and undertakings (“Others, still more astute, / Point to the possibilities of error / At the very start”). Despair seeps into the collectedness of the voice: only old-fashioned “honour” and indispensable sanity are

²⁶¹ Auden, *The Selected Prose and Poetry of Byron*, xi.

left to it. I would contend that the voice of “We made all possible preparations” has a vestigial aspect which we can understand in relation to the light verse heritage.

Tallying with this account of “We made all possible preparations”, Kingsley Amis (the subsequent editor of the *Oxford Book of Light Verse*) remarked upon Auden’s darker inclusions in the 1938 anthology,²⁶² and there are other pointers to take from the volume when we consider Auden’s own work. We recall that Auden’s selection contains many anonymous poems from numerous traditions; Irish (“The bonny Bunch of Roses O”), American (“Stagolee”), and feudal English (“The rural Dance about the Maypole”).²⁶³ Earlier in his career Auden cultivates a form of light verse anonymity: an anonymity which in the modern age could only be patterned into the stance of the poem, in order to utter the binding terms of commonality, as “We made all possible preparations” suggested. At this stage in modernity those terms are oblique, but the lyric yields an immediate accessibility. A folk culture may have perished in industrial England, but “We made all possible preparations” seeks to resurrect the voice which speaks out of the culture as composite, which cannot, and need not, be traced to its author as final origin. It is light because implicitly, unsettlingly familiar; its lightness and contemporaneity lie in its ironical detachment, which aims beyond simpler satirical targets to strike at the bases of an intellectual, political and moral epoch, bases that are fast disintegrating.

The collection of so-called “Shorts”, written between 1929 and 1931, are also worth remarking on in this context. Standing alone, they might not warrant any real attention; collected, they convince as exercises in the rudiments of light verse, containing snatches of black humour, farce, vulgarity, and conversations. Their throwaway quality adds to their appeal. The testing of sexual taboos becomes congenial here (more prominent in *The English Auden*, 50-52, than in the *Collected Poems*),

Schoolboy, making lonely maps,
Better do it with some chaps.

²⁶² Kingsley Amis ed., *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1978; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), v.

²⁶³ Auden, *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, 359; 445; 190.

So too does jaded wisdom and *le bon mot*,

Medicines and Ethics: these
Are like mercenaries.
They join the other side when they
Have made you pay.

A proverbial use of the first person emerges also,

I am beginning to lose patience
With my personal relations.
They are not deep
And they are not cheap.

As private and as minor as these verses are, they present us with a kind of hyper-poetry - language distilled into immediacy; as if Auden is toying with the viability of the proverb. Proverbs are repeatable verities, prospectively applicable across generations, across localities. Light verse and the proverb are closely related in this respect; they both look for their sustenance to the general and the common, borne of the assumption that experiences are communicable, transposable, and possibly instructive. But Auden's proverbial world offers new kinds of verities: it is one of pathologies ("The friends of the born nurse / Are always getting worse") and inversions, naming a characteristic severity towards how one should live:

Those who will not reason
Perish in the act.
Those who will not act
Perish for that reason.

The "I" of "I am beginning to lose patience" is proverbial; neither explicatory or confessional, its purely semantic life is made possible by the shared experience. It is the "I" as mode and as attitude. The proverbial "I" has been given a fresh injection of life by the preponderance of other, similar "I"s in the mass media nexus,²⁶⁴ which also have both something and nothing to impart; their penny's worth of knowledge,

²⁶⁴ LeMahieu relates how the techniques of mass media communication in the early twentieth century gradually converged on a model of affected personal intimacy (*A Culture for Democracy*, 43): "...the most effective strategy of communication was personal, intimate, and subjective."

garnered from their experience of as implicated observers, who know themselves chiefly through their being acted upon:

The bird goes up and the bat goes down:
The bird will burn and the bat will drown.

This wilfully slight verse is predicated on brevity, but its brevity is of a totally different order than, for example, the Imagism of Pound or Aldington: it offers no considered philosophy. Instead it is disposable in a similar manner to a proverb, but the conditions for such utterances are now shaped by the imaginative weather of the time. Auden's "Shorts" are composed with an intimation of the terms of social taxonomy, with its pronounced divisions of the communal body into groups determined by interests, yet they still strive toward the status of the proverbial. The terms of taxonomy have become both the instrument of the collective imagination's self-recognition and, at the individual level, the means by which distance is preserved between subjects. It is this defining antinomy which continually informs the curiosity of Auden's light verse.

Thematically, this antinomy frequently loses its balance in Auden's early work, as we occasionally see his lyrics acquire a sourness that, ostensibly, has much in common with the orthodox modernist contempt for the age of the masses, with its demotic cultural programme.²⁶⁵ If we take a lyric such as "To Settle in this Village of the Heart" (May 1934), we can hear dissonance in the pitch of Auden's work, which can perhaps be explained within the framework of light verse. The poem has not attracted a great deal of critical interest,²⁶⁶ but I would argue that in the expanded context of lightness, it presents valuable insights. The voice of the lyric is, again, palpably familiar yet impersonal: the voice of affected upper class scepticism; but Auden puts it to deeper use:

²⁶⁵ John Carey sees Huxley's *Brave New World* as a representative novel in this respect: "The kind of happiness the masses are capable of depends, the novel reveals, on vulgar, shallow, mind-destroying or immoral amusements." *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 87.

²⁶⁶ Fuller, in light of Auden's correspondence with Isherwood, understands the poem as a veiled account of the former's desire for security, as opposed to sexual restlessness (*W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 171-2).

To settle in this village of the heart,
My darling, can you bear it? True, the hall
With its yews and famous dovecote is still there
Just as in childhood, but the grand old couple
Who loved us all so equally are dead;
The English Auden, 151.

What the lyric presents is a mode of social thinking (or perhaps, “point of view” thinking – the thinking inspired by new social taxonomies) making incursions into the inner life, the “village of the heart”. The high-minded and languidly contemptuous voice describes the limits installed by the conventional relationship (“the hall /...is still there”). But the relationship itself is less important than the growing sense of entropy and claustrophobia occasioned by the bland, homogenised exteriors of bourgeois consumer living. It is the garishness of this cultural upheaval which compels the attention of the language here. Without the confidence afforded to us by the equality of love of “the grand old couple” (possibly church and state), we are left to devise the terms of our own equality: a project which, as the acidity of the speaker’s tone implies, is contrary to all instincts. The speaker imagines this insidious regularity producing some extreme adverse reaction in their partner:

The identical and townee smartness,
Will you really see as home, and not depend
For comfort on the chance, the shy encounter
With the irresponsible beauty of the stranger?

The cast of thought is clearly Freudian, more specifically the Freud of *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the “I”* and *The Future of an Illusion*; if the individual’s relation to culture has always been characterised by an uneasy détente between drives and compensations,²⁶⁷ then the appeal of the compensations offered by this kind of life is minimal. Culture is now both monolithic and impalpable, bearing down on the speaker; it is no longer an activity to which such voices appreciably contribute; it is instead becoming a facet of history, that is, something which is happening to them. They are now the objects in a new cultural grammar.

²⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Future of an Illusion” [1927], *Mass Psychology and Other Writings*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2004), 110. Freud describes each individual as a potential “enemy of culture” on the grounds of their inevitable reaction to the restrictions imposed by communal life.

In a sense, however, such an attitude is not new, and here we might reflect with more circumspection on Auden's poetics. First, this kind of complaint has been voiced time and again in the early century, as far back as 1910; the perspective is affined to Forster's in *Howards End*.²⁶⁸ By the thirties the growth of suburbia was a standard preoccupation among writers. (By the end of the decade, furthermore, the flagrant irony produced by suburban expansion in full recognition of the danger of foreign attack would be sharpened into a new sense of the preposterous, most notably in Orwell's *Coming up for Air*, in 1939).²⁶⁹ In May 1934, at Auden's time of writing "To settle in this village of the heart", such a voice is familiar enough to be parodied and theatricalised. The lyric is fairly close in colour to Auden's light verse, then, but his poetic spectrum is sufficiently wide that we ought not to mischaracterize it. Humourless and darkly allusive, we cannot call the poem light in Amis's terms, but it is certainly of a piece with other instances of Auden's lightness, chiefly because of the voice itself, which is rendered in a strophe of quasi-free verse, centring around lines of decasyllables that vary according to the stresses and emphases of spoken conversation, their looseness underscored where necessary by a subtler regularity of meter: "The *sham* ornamentation, the *strident* swimming pool". The closeness of the lyric to dramatic monologue suggests an element of ironic hyperbole: the voice is indeed satirised ("None too particular" is a little too curt, inviting mockery), but finally plaintive, capable of another order of reflection:

O can you see precisely in our gaucheness
The neighbour's strongest wish, to serve and love?

The sourness of the lyric's tone proceeds from the recognition, explained here at the coda, that there might not be a more rarefied individuality to lose in any case. The speaker sees the terms of commonality, sees his implication within the movement of history as, crucially, the aggregate of individual behaviour and propensities. The couple's "gaucheness" is the measure of their fitness for the age; their snobbery and

²⁶⁸ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910; repr., London: Penguin, 2000), 93. Mrs Wilcox, a little hysterically, puts the question to Margaret Schlegel: "Can what they call civilization be right, if people mayn't die in the room where they were born?"

²⁶⁹ George Orwell, *Coming Up For Air* (1939; repr., London: Penguin, 1980), 20. Orwell's narrator George Bowling muses: "The great black bombing plane swayed a little in the air and zoomed ahead so I couldn't see it.... In two years' time, one years' time, what shall we be doing when we see one of those things? Making a dive for the cellar, wetting our bags with fright."

distrust testifying to a deeper desire to simplify their inner lives and take their place within the mass, whose motto might be “to serve and love”. “To settle in this village of the heart” is important, then, because it demonstrates the kind of poetic chiaroscuro which Auden could so effectively employ; the lighter shades of lyric’s satire converge with a stronger element of reflection. Consequently the quiddity of the lyric expresses the challenges facing poetry under the terms of twentieth century modernity, by bestowing the general voice (that is, the light voice in this instance) with an individuated sense of anxiety.

III - Auden’s Mature Light Verse

“Letter to Lord Byron”: July to October 1936. *The English Auden*, 169-199.

The continuous form in which we read “Letter to Lord Byron” in *The English Auden* and the *Collected Poems*, is perhaps contrary to the epistolary spirit exemplified by the poem in its original incarnation in *Letters from Iceland*. There, its sections scattered across the volume, punctuated by letters to other addressees, tourist guides and comical mini-histories, “Letter to Lord Byron” seems more comfortable and more fittingly met. As Auden implies at the end of the poem (“This letter that’s already far too long”) light verse is most effective when its brisk pace is condensed. That said, in aping the “airy manner” of its addressee, “Letter to Lord Byron” is a professed “experiment” in resurrecting the longer narrative modes pioneered in works such as “Don Juan”. Specifically, the experiment is once more one of voice: can such a manner be successfully inhabited by a voice speaking in an age where the place of the poet is found within the mass? If so, how does that voice describe its circumstances and what kind of access do we have to it, as readers? The question of autobiography, or rather, of self-presentation, is unavoidable here. Byron’s voice was inseparable from his persona: he was in a sense the first public poet, whose renown preceded him. Auden’s letter depends on fruitful contrast, being an experiment in the relationship of autobiographical poetry to one’s historical milieu. Where Byron was the Romantic

poet-as-historical actor, Auden is his modern, much less exalted progeny. Auden's cap-doffing first lines make this clear:

Excuse, my lord, the liberty I take
In thus addressing you. I know that you
Will pay the price of authorship and make
The allowances an author has to do.
A poet's fan-mail will be nothing new.

Auden repeatedly takes the deferential view, praising Byron's work and style ("...I have, at the age of twenty-nine / Just read *Don Juan* and I found it fine"). But behind the praise for Byron is the wish to revive the closeness of his voice in a modern setting, a closeness which the modern postal service dispatching this letter might effect, serving as metaphor:

To learn the use in culture's propagation
Of modern methods of communication:
New roads, new rails, new contacts, as we know
From documentaries by the G. P. O.

Light verse is the best expedient for this propagation.

Auden's voice is digressive, urbane and never discomposed. It suggests that there is still a place within modernity for meaningful self-exposition, no matter how trivial its "airy manner" of communication might first appear: meaningful in situating the speaker in a clear relationship to the different modes of life in society, from the intimate to the historical. "Letter to Lord Byron" is a performance of personality, then. It is choral in the sense that we follow its meanderings without complication, as Auden holds court on all things, "From natural scenery to men and women, / Myself, the arts, the European news:". But we ought to qualify this with the stipulation that the performance is too informal to be repeatable and speakable, as we have seen in earlier choral lyrics. We are not induced, as it were, to participate. It cannot be called lyric in generic terms because (like its Byronic inspirations) it carries no suggestion of song. But it presences the voice of the speaker – this time Auden himself, or a poetical self-performance – such that it invites our company in sharing a supra-cultural view, out across contemporary affairs. Auden's self-effacing lines, having produced "the

flattest line in English verse” and detailing his lowly place on Parnassus, are offset by the importance of his project in preserving MacNeice’s “human values”:

Parnassus after all is not a mountain,
Reserved for A. 1. climbers such as you;
It’s got a park, it’s got a public fountain.

In the second part of the poem those values encourage an irreverent view of history: the intervening time between Byron’s life and Auden’s is briskly, but somehow fully recapped:

I’ll clear my throat and take a Rover’s breath
And skip a century of hope and sin –
For far too much has happened since your death.
Crying went out and the cold bath came in,
With drains, bananas, bicycles, and tin,
And Europe saw from Ireland to Albania
The Gothic revival and the Railway mania.

Auden creates in “Letter to Lord Byron” a realm of imagined civility, where one can present one’s thoughts without being called to account for them in “responsible” terms. Thus his offerings on the modern infatuation with technology and progress are too funny to be elevated to the status of doctrine (“Preserve me, above all, from central-heating”): they are instead the stuff of the “point of view”, here redeemed by the wide-angle lens of the poem and by its engagingly conversational pace. For this reason we should guard against relegating “Letter to Lord Byron” on grounds of frivolity or triviality. Justin Replogle argues that the poem is an example of Auden’s “Antipoet”, who “holds life to be a blessing, and has little inclination to dissect and condemn”.²⁷⁰ Be that as it may, the manner of reading experience that the poem fosters has a valence quite out of proportion with its fun-making tone. The poem exists in its own (literary) public sphere, and in the brightness and promiscuity of its voice there is the insinuation that modern experience (*pace* Benjamin) is perhaps manageable, according to a standpoint of openness, clarity and humour.

²⁷⁰ Replogle, *Auden’s Poetry*, 125.

Although it would seem to be diametrically opposed to the definition of lyric propounded by Adorno with its troubled principle of individuation,²⁷¹ “Letter to Lord Byron” can still be said to crystallise the motion of the self according to its history and culture; it is just that that version of selfhood we glean therein is based not upon the confinement that results from identity thinking, but upon the voice’s humorous expansiveness. The force of the poem is vocal rather than formal: this voice is still capable of a historical précis that fully comprehends the fundamental shifts occasioned by mass society. England’s transition into twentieth century modernity is captured, the “John Bull” of days gone by wiped out by the First World War, and replaced by the “bowler hat who straphangs in the tube, / And kicks the tyrant only in his dreams.” In his dread of all extremes, the bowler hat is the cipher of behaviourism, the unwittingly generative unit of mass society (“I may not be courageous, but I save”), haunted by and subservient to “the ogre”. Anthony Hecht equates the ogre with monolithic “Authority”,²⁷² but Auden never names it as such, being more interested in its effects: crippling stasis and cynicism towards humanity. The bright tone of the poem is clouded in these sections as Auden describes the Ogre as a recurring force in history, and presents kow-towing to the Ogre as the recessive historical gene:

Banker or landlord, booking-clerk or Pope,
Whenever he’s lost his faith in choice and thought,
When a man sees the future without hope,
Whenever he endorses Hobbes’ report
“The life of man is nasty, brutish, short”,
The dragon rises from his garden border
And promises to set up law and order.

The meanderings and the tangents between sections are unified at bottom; Auden’s thoughts on (capitalised) Art – “To me Art’s subject is the human clay” – in part three serves equally as a motto for the worldview that “Letter to Lord Byron” makes available. Light verse is among the arts best suited to capturing the substance of that human clay, because of the transparency of meaning and uncompromised intelligibility that it implies. Wordsworthian nature-worship is countered by the celebration of the modern quotidian and the place of people within it. What follows in

²⁷¹ Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society”, 213.

²⁷² Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 192.

part three is a poetic account of Auden's argument in the introduction to the Oxford Book, whereby Romanticism signals the end of patronage for the artist and the birth of self-sufficiency: "He sang and painted and drew dividends, / But lost responsibilities and friends". Responsibility recurs once more; the modern responsibility, as we have seen, is to respond to Romantic detachment with a corrective social awareness, as Auden himself insists, using "clay" in an ironically snobbish (perhaps aristocratic, for the benefit of his addressee) rather than a profound sense here: "The common clay and the uncommon nobs / Were far too busy making piles or starving / To look at pictures, poetry, or carving". This responsibility further entails the poet's self-account in part four, but the airy manner Auden has adopted lifts this out of the mundane:

My passport says I'm five feet and eleven,
With hazel eyes and fair (it's tow-like) hair,
That I was born in York in 1907,
With no distinctive markings anywhere.
Which isn't quite correct. Conspicuous there
On my right cheek appears a large brown mole;
I think I don't dislike it on the whole.

This is self-exposition not mired in subjectivity: a genial, communicable personality speaking the language of the "point of view". Auden's mockery of "Das Volk" ordering "sausages and lagers", some of whom have based their notion of racial purity on an unathletic Nordic Aryan such as he, reminds us of the freedom of the spirit of light verse as it has become newly important. It finds another, broader enemy in the will to conformity and behaviourism, where "telling the truth" means divesting life of its nourishing ambiguities:

I hate the modern trick, to tell the truth,
Of straightening out the kinks in the young mind,
Our passion for the tender plant of youth,
Our hatred for all weeds of any kind.
Slogans are bad: the best that I can find
Is this: "Let each child have that's in our care
As much neurosis as the child can bear."

In its concluding round-up of contemporary matters, “Letter to Lord Byron” perhaps strikes its only ambiguous note. Does its manner of narrating the individual’s place within history make history assailable – does it instate the “tiny measure” of contribution – or does it play and mock in the face of history’s unbreakable influence? Auden’s scepticism about “The Great Utopia” he and his generation have entertained is telling:

The Great Utopia, free of all complexes,
The Withered State is, at the moment, such
A dream as that of being both the sexes.

The imagined civil realm conjured by “Letter to Lord Byron” is, as Auden has said, not the place for narrow sloganeering. It marks a sphere of humane civility. This does not amount to passive acceptance of the status quo. Instead the “conversational song” of the poem convinces us of the importance of human values and the closeness and proximity of modern subjects. It encourages us to endorse its implicit willingness to return a sense of agency to one’s involvement in history, a different and more valuable way of “telling the truth.”

“As I Walked Out One Evening”: November 1937. *The English Auden*, 227-228.

After the programmatic lightness of “Letter to Lord Byron”, Auden returned in “As I walked out one evening” to the lyric ballad form, apparently searching for a lightness with complementary shades of poignancy. The element of vocality is paramount in the poem. “As I walked out one evening” has what we can call a distinctively Audenic mutuality, between the employment of traditional elements of light verse poetics (the small-scale narrative structure, the clarity of address and prosodic consistency, the components of song and dialogue) and weightier themes such as transience and death. It is Auden’s imagery, though, which ensures that the lyric is of its moment, capturing the quiddity of thinking without recourse to the discursive or the arcane. We are invited into the poem by another anonymous “I”; not, confessional; not, in this instance, proverbial; but purely narrative. The “I” is a clear pane through which we

observe what unfolds. This is how we enter into lyric. We tessellate with the “I”, we observe along with it:

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

This is an image pulling in two different directions, drawing on a well-established repository of the man-nature metaphor, but rooted in the consciousness of its moment. The voice is casually undifferentiating – no single man or woman stands out from the crowd - but there are notes of awe and of fear in the description of this concentrated human activity. We might say that this voice is also recasting the heightened visibility that characterises the social; it encounters its fellow men en masse. Linger within this spectacle is the sense that the wheat will inevitably be harvested, a sense that ushers in the first note of transience and death which will dominate the lyric.²⁷³ Auden has intimated straight away - through our tessellation with his speaker - that death has been brought into a different kind of symbiosis with the concentration of people into masses. Collective entities eventually perish, as inexorably as does the individual body, therefore collective life might be experienced as a manner of rehearsal for death, not simply in the immolation of the self,²⁷⁴ but in our being implicated in the inevitable expiration of the collective body, in whatever form. The ballad’s metrical regularity serves a distinct, almost hypnotic purpose, offering a clear inducement to the reader, drawing him or her in further, encouraging us to intuit the deeper significance of how we are positioned within this mass, at once within and without.

The poem continues in this conspiratorial vein: we eavesdrop with the speaker as the lover sings. The singing voice arrives from nowhere: in stark contrast to the undifferentiated “fields of harvest wheat”, it sings the inner life. But it is the emphasis on raw sentiment, rather than personal circumstance - on what might be applied generally - which chimes with the preceding stanza:

²⁷³ John Fuller contends that this image introduces the theme of the transience of love (*W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 271): I would argue that the poem articulates the conditioning cast of thought which adumbrates its meditation on love.

²⁷⁴ Freud, “Mass Psychology and Analysis of the “I”, *Mass Psychology and Other Writings*, 20-22. Freud uses Gustave LeBon’s theories of the mass mind, which describe the loss of self within a mass, as his starting point.

“I’ll love you, dear, I’ll love you
Till China and Africa meet
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street.

Again, though the subject-matter of the song is weighty, and is related earnestly, we can bring it into sharper focus within the rubric of light verse. The song of Love is similarly affined to the speaker’s introductory stanza in its nakedness. There is in light verse a bareness of presentation which, manifested here in the speaking “I” and the immediate way we enter into the lyric, allows for the enchantment of surroundings and actors. “As I walked out one evening” operates through this kind of correspondence between our enthrallment to its voices and the fantastical events that those voices describe. So the traditional aspects of the poem defy their familiarity. The lover’s ease of expression seems to redeem the stock element, the conventionality of the construction “I’ll love you till”. Auden’s imagery leavens the sense of earnestness (“And the seven stars go squawking / Like geese about the sky”), a note that continues into the dramatic peak of the lyric. The Ur-voice of Time (through its minions the clocks) responds to the quotidian warmth of Love’s song portentously, with bleak abstract nouns:

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
“O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

“In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

Behind the quotidian lurks the inevitability of death and erasure:

“The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

Iambics have alternated with anapaests to convey the song; here the latter are more prominent as the voice of Time finds its own sense of fable. The rising rhythms hasten the voice of Time onwards to its climax. If death is perceptible everywhere, even through “the crack in the tea-cup”, then death is a project of the imagination, in a similar vein to the fable, the story, the legend (“Where the beggars raffle the banknotes / And the giant is enchanting to Jack,”). Death is inexorable, yet indescribable. Time concludes its sermon with a return to the terms of life in light of this, with the inevitability of death as the conditioning factor (“Life remains a blessing / Although you cannot bless”). There remains the truer, more abiding version of “love”, which is less a question of passion and feeling between individuals and, as we saw in “To settle in this village of the heart”, more a struggle for collective existence as produced by the efforts of flawed individuals (“You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart.”)²⁷⁵ The final stanza is spoken by the narrating “I” as we are briskly ushered back into the quiet:

It was late, late in the evening,
 The lovers they were gone;
 The clocks had ceased their chiming,
 And the deep river ran on.

What is most palpable from this coda is the pace of our imaginative investment in the respective voices of Love and Time, or, our transfixed utterance of their competing songs. The ending is simply recounted, not explicated. It is as though we are abruptly given back our own thoughts. “As I Walked Out One Evening” thus uses the speed of light verse – its simplicity of involvement, and the eagerness with which we enter into it – to vivify an age-old thematic refrain for its own time. Love is often doomed to end as abruptly; Auden’s success with the lyric is to frame this truism through a historically vivid manner of perception, rooted in the mass social experience.

²⁷⁵ Mendelson senses autobiography merged in these lines: “He [Auden] can no longer evade the universal imperative to love by protesting that his own crooked sexuality makes love impossible” (*Early Auden*, 237). I would contend that the “crookedness” in question is not Auden’s per sé: it refers to the conditions of social coexistence first and foremost.

“It’s farewell to the drawing-room’s civilised cry”: January 1937.
The English Auden, 208-209.

Of all Auden’s most renowned early works, this engrossing lyric is perhaps most central to the narration of “the Devil’s decade”: the Devil himself “has broken parole and arisen” and is running amok across bourgeois Europe.²⁷⁶ How might we understand the placement of Auden’s speaker, as a light verse narrator, and his description of the resurrection of this Satanic figure at his time of writing? Written in January 1937, this is evidently the poetry to complement the disaster narrative finding increasingly urgent expression. But how does the lightness of the verse configure that disaster? As I suggested earlier the element of speed and pace is crucial: the frenetic rhythms patterned into the quatrains, ratcheted by repeated anapaests, create a taut stanza, rendered stronger still by the full-rhyming couplets. The proximity and implacability of the catastrophe is domesticated in an uncomfortably literal sense, through imagery (the devil “hides in the cupboard and under the bed”) and a sustained tone of levity, by turns rueful, foreboding, celebratory and abandoned. Edward Mendelson characterises the voice as that of a “mad dictator”, seeing behind its element of performance a coherent identity.²⁷⁷ John Fuller identifies the speaker as “deliberately an *alter-ego* of the poet”,²⁷⁸ which is also valid, yet, as I will show, only to a limited degree. I would submit that, as the voice of light verse *par excellence*, the speaker is a protean creature, speaking out of the culture itself. Certainly its imagery, its imaginative promiscuity and its tone can be conceptualised at this level. It is by tracking the kinks in this tone that we can fully appreciate the discursive qualities of the lyric, qualities which lend it the gravitas that orientates its infectious lightness.

“It’s farewell...” is evidently an attempt to shape the decade’s self-recognition: a declamatory intervention into the ongoing debate about what comprised the times. (For this reason I choose to examine the original version; Auden’s later alterations cannot be said to improve on it.)²⁷⁹ The fitness of light verse as a response

²⁷⁶ The lyric has a clear and direct inspiration; in the second letter to E. M. A in *Letters from Iceland* Auden writes about his excitement upon having found “an excellent collection of German songs”, one of which is a “Dance of Death” markedly similar in tone and imagery to “It’s farewell...”. *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 142-3.

²⁷⁷ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 331.

²⁷⁸ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 256.

²⁷⁹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 156.

to the litany of catastrophes and failures (Franco's capture of Madrid in November of the previous year, for instance; further consolidations by the Hitler's Germany; the wider economic malaise which, but for occasional reverses, continued in earnest)²⁸⁰ is perhaps best elucidated if we take the content of the poem at face value. In other words, we should consider the sincerity of the "farewell" to all the cherished principles, all the previous complacent assumptions of security and prosperity which Enlightenment Europe had nurtured. This is a poetic instance of play, a voice uttered from within a rational culture as its premises are apparently disintegrating. Mihai I. Spariosu has given a comprehensive account of the evolution of the concept of play, and this concept can encourage us to understand the disaster narrative of the thirties – and Auden's lyric – in richer terms. Building on Freud's emphasis, given in "Character and Culture" and "Mass Psychology", on the progress and regress of cultures between rational and pre-rational modes, Spariosu offers a nuanced, agonistic alternative, contending that those opposing modes compete within a given culture at a given time, to no pre-established end.²⁸¹ The voice of "It's farewell..." might be located in the melee of such competition, at a time when the rational – or a received version of it, the rationality of Enlightenment libertarianism – is being dismantled. Immediately, such disabuse of long-standing confidences is half-bewailed, half-relished by the speaker:

It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilised cry,
The professor's sensible whereto and why,
The frock-coated diplomat's social aplomb,
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.

We could not call this sense of riveted anxiety ambiguous; it is perfectly consistent with a view, which we have seen elaborated in other light lyrics, at once detached and entirely implicated. Violence is the terminus of all culture – the firmer reality, the latent truth of human activity. The perspective here (against "Letter to Lord Byron") is Hobbesian: fearful, yet unblinking. The accoutrements of culture such as high art

²⁸⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, 1914-1991* (1994; repr., London: Abacus, 2003), 161; Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, 85. Thorpe relates the "strong burst of prosperity" in the middle of the decade, called to a halt by the recession of late 1937.

²⁸¹ Mihai I. Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 10-18.

(“The works for two pianos”) consoling myths and legends (“reasonable giants and remarkable fairies”) are as “frangible” as peace itself (“the branches of olive are stored upstairs”). Violence and chaos, embodied in the devil, are now the conditions for living. Again, the pace of the verse has a levelling effect wholly concordant with the underlying theme of rationality’s decline: the stuff of art, of myth, of bourgeois luxury and of Christianity is all reduced to the level of incidental detail, material over which the voice can flit.

The speaker sees the mundane effects of modern industrial life with the pagan eyes of superstition and fear:

Like influenza he walks abroad,
He stands by the bridge, he waits by the ford,
As a goose or a gull he flies overhead,
He hides in the cupboard and under the bed.

The psycho-geography is reminiscent of earlier lyrics (“Look there! The sunk road winding” particularly), but here, carried along by the momentum of the lines, it coheres more effectively: it insinuates a sense of foreboding which is more articulate and penetrative in a light lyric setting. From the first “O” of “O were he to triumph”, the voice is melodramatic and overplayed. The “dear heart” being addressed is a device, a kind of ossified poeticism that the voice creates spontaneously. It is as though the voice is imbibing the excess that saturates the culture as it is burning out (the “dear heart” reappears only in the final stanza, with similar effect), and we as speaking readers revive it. Each stanza seems at this stage to divert the trajectory of the lyric, conveying a stream of thought eager to include as much as possible, only then to move on once more. When the speaker decides “I’m the axe that must cut them [the “unsound trees”] down to the ground”, he is speaking as the contrived poet-as-hero, as the expression of one’s impotence in the face of disaster, and it seems as Auden himself:

For I, after all, am the Fortunate One,
The Happy-Go-Lucky, the spoilt Third Son;
For me it is written the Devil to chase
And to rid the earth of the human race.

These notionally autobiographical lines (Auden being the “spoilt Third son” by his own admission) could contain a coy reference to his position as the anointed one, the leader of the thirties poets, a position of inflated importance he is quick to puncture by the last line, with its delusions of omnipotence. At this point the lyric switches to a high-octane polemic that the speaker is unable to sustain for very long. Adopting the moral stance of opposition to the times (bemoaning the “sedentary Sodom and slick Gomorrah” of the modern industrial world, whose apathy and efficiency are mutually productive), the speaker soon takes on the characteristics he is harpooning (“I shall have caviare thick on my bread,”). The individual will (“I shall come, I shall punish”) leads only to imitative ridiculousness and mindless self-display:

I shall ride the parade in a platinum car,
My features shall shine, my name shall be Star,
Day-long and night-long the bells I shall peal,
And down the long street I shall turn the cartwheel.

Suitably, after this momentary peak of self-glorification, the first-person mode seems to exhaust itself. We are back to the dance of death and its pagan notion of history. Auden gives us strains of infantilism and adolescent tittering (“So Little John, Long John, Peter and Paul, / And poor little Horace with only one ball”) to evoke a condensed, cyclical history. We are trapped in the repetition of blood-letting, popularly understood in the form of the paradigmatic catastrophe, the First World War (“You shall leave your breakfast, your desk and your play / On a fine summer morning the Devil to slay.”). Violence is the engine of history, violence which becomes in the climactic stanzas of the lyric the last bastion of meaning. The modern world subsists in consumer indulgence and violent expiation (“And the earth shall be emptied of mortal sin”). Narratives of progress – more specifically, the “embarrassment of beliefs” of the decade – have been dislodged by the pagan oracular vision, which exists along side the Christian mythology of the lyric (the myth of the Fall, the premonitory Star), and within the clutter of consumer life:

The fishes are silent deep in the sea,
The skies are lit up like a Christmas tree,
The star in the West shoots its warning cry:
“Mankind is alive, but Mankind must die.”

So good-bye to the house with its wallpaper red,
Good-bye to the sheets on the warm double bed,
Good-bye to the beautiful birds on the wall,
It's good-bye, dear heart, good-bye to you all.

The “dear heart” and the refrain of “good-bye” remind us at the climax of the lyric of its essential mode of address: the song, the performance. By the end of “It’s farewell” Auden’s poetics have taken on the qualities of invocation (the stressed beats which end the line after the anapaests are especially effective at the lyric’s end: “*birds on the wall*”; “good-*bye* to you *all*”) beckoning the spectacle of destruction²⁸² which would, his speaker imagines, fulfil the culture of death and erasure, whose indicators simmer beneath modern industrial life. The lyric is itself a kind of wish-fulfilment, then. It is voiced as a celebration of the will to destroy, for which the mechanics of light verse, paradoxically, offer the most germane poetic realisation. We are invited to recite along, to involve ourselves in the panache of the speaker’s performance.

“It’s farewell to the drawing room’s civilised cry” stands as the most compelling example of Auden’s light verse because of the way that it exhausts the choral mode. Our attention is drawn to the currents of uncontrollable collective energies that pass beneath the apparently stable terrain of mass society. In its irresistible panache and high-octane pace, the lyric induces a dizzy-headedness in the reader which muddies the distinction in our minds between the moment of immersion in the poem and the moment of reflection, and this confusion defines its historicity. Both the dangers and the seductions of the collective utterance seem to backlight the lyric: it is a warning and an inducement. “As I walked out this evening” is premised on a similar insight in its themes, but the experiential element is more pronounced here: we are appreciably aware of the high stakes of collective involvement. Auden’s destructive devil is finally an embodiment of the very mutuality that grounds how we read the lyric, and by extension, how precariously we live together.

²⁸² Anthony Hecht reads the poem, after Mendelson, as a “rebuke to... fanaticism” (*The Hidden Law*, 95), discounting, I feel, its complicated sincerity.

Chapter Five: Lyric and Modern Politics.

I – The Nature of the Political in Auden’s Work.

What relationship can we ascertain between the nature of modern politics and the workings of the lyric in Auden’s hands? If the lyric is so opportunely placed as to realise decisive moments in thinking, on what kind of basis would we describe a given moment as political? First, this chapter aims to loosen the established taxonomy of Auden’s political works. We will see that in the sustained attempt to engage with each lyric, we cannot confine our discussion to the level of content alone. This is the central tenet of my approach to the political Auden. The reconstructive, ideational approach can encourage us to regard his works as itemisations of political trends, with an unreflective equation made between poet and belief. This risks the critical ossification of Auden’s works, fixing them as part of a historical narrative first and foremost, their generative power as art coming a distant and unsatisfactory second. I will demonstrate that the content of political argument in a given work can only be meaningfully explained if we understand the basis on which the lyric finds its voicing. The peculiar kind of magnetism of Auden’s political lyrics (in which, as I will explain, I include earlier works such as “Control of the Passes” and “Consider this and in our time” as well as the more obvious pieces such as “Spain 1937” and “September 1, 1939”) can lead us question their placement as totems of a broader thirties narrative.

The status of these poems as barometers of the thirties zeitgeist is by now well established, but I reiterate: it is not my intention to arrange a sequence of lyrics so as to relay the convolutions of Auden’s ideological allegiances, the critical approach which Edward Mendelson has brought to its fullest and most lucid conclusion.²⁸³ Instead, a fresh exploration of the nature of politics as revealed by Auden’s lyric, through their emphasis on voice, is required. Consequently I isolate each featured

²⁸³ Mendelson examines Auden’s prose works such as his contribution to *New Verse* (Autumn 1938), “The Sportsmen”, a parable of recent poetic history. This is identified as a watershed moment, signifying Auden’s break with the poetry of commitment and the beginnings of his gravitation towards a contrary, Eliotic position. *Early Auden* (299): “After five years of bending his art to political pressure, of joining poetry to politics through the visionary rhetoric of Yeats, Auden honors Eliot’s persistent refusal to corrupt his vocation.”

lyric, and try to gauge what each singularly presents to the reader; any remarks concerning continuity are incidental, and hopefully serve to define differences all the more sharply. Before I recount the close readings of lyrics which encourage this, a brief clarification of context and terminology is necessary.

Here our revised definition of lyric begins to demonstrate its value. We are licensed to liberate the lyric from its traditional moorings in intimacy and subjectivity by the compound of private and public, social and political which, together, comprise the experience of life in mass society. Adorno's interpretation of lyric is at its most germane here: even when an isolated subjectivity is described by one of Auden's speakers, the manner in which it comes to be voiced palpably betrays the pressure of an external influence. Presently I will return in more detail to the works of Hannah Arendt, and will continue to do so throughout this chapter. Arendt's central thesis of the "rise of society" - at the expense of a demonstrably separated public and private sphere, and the sphere of intimacy discovered and philosophised by Rousseau - secured my revised definition of the lyric, and is the starting point for my understanding of the nature of the political in Auden's work.

Arendt's understanding of the political is complicated by her various constructions of the term. At times she uses it to connote simply the forms of government,²⁸⁴ but we see quite clearly that the term "politics" carries a more substantial philosophical weight in her reckoning. We recall our description of Arendt's tripartite classification of human life from Chapter Two, into work, labour, and action. Politics is a species of action; indeed, perhaps the most important, for it is the one in which human freedom is fully realised. As George Kateb summarises, "Scattered throughout [Arendt's] work is the idea that politics is action and that action is speech in public about public affairs".²⁸⁵ Such speech is made possible by the maintenance of the distinction between the public and private realms; and Arendt's account of modernity is predicated upon the loss of this distinction according to the rise of the social. How, then, does the lyric voice find the wherewithal to speak about

²⁸⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 63. "The problem they [the American poor] posed was not social but political, it concerned not the order of society but the form of government."

²⁸⁵ George Kateb, "Political action: its nature and advantages", *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 132.

experiences which we might call political in twentieth century modernity? Evidently the terms of this question contain its answer. Lyric's privilege of the speaking voice – the way that, through its vocality, lyric fosters the colloquy between reader and imagined speaker – amounts to a proxy rehearsal of kind of interlocution upon which, to Arendt, politics depends. Lyric's vocality is not impeded by the rise of society: we have seen, in the previous chapter, how Auden's work is vivified by it in other contexts. So the manner of experiencing lyric poetry, seen from this perspective, is especially apposite to the question of the political experience as attested in art: we recall Adorno's description of a "model of a possible praxis" that can be seen to constitute a collective subject, contained in the aesthetic experience.²⁸⁶ The quality of outward projection that inheres in Auden's lyric voice has an appreciable contiguity with political action as comprehended by Arendt. Kateb remarks on her habit of mentioning the similarity between politics and the aesthetic:

To speak of the content of politics as politics, to speak of politics as speech concerned with the creation or perpetuation of the preconditions of such speech, is really to claim that the purpose of politics is politics, that politics (when authentic) exists for its own sake. That means in part that authentic politics cannot be contaminated by the necessary or the useful, but rather has an affinity to all beautiful things, to the realm of the aesthetic....Political speech can be worthy of memorialization, but as spoken it lives in the moment of its performance. At the same time, engaging in authentic politics is not like playing a game. Politics is deeply serious; it can be mortally serious, depending as it does on the actor's willingness to risk his life.²⁸⁷

If (authentic) politics is configured as speaking in public about public affairs, and is a kind of performance, then it is necessarily finite. It needs protection, needs a sphere in which it can be recognised and remembered. Arguing against the totalitarian monolith, Arendt stipulates that only the continuation of a public realm built upon the recognition of human plurality can safeguard political speaking. We will observe that Arendt's appreciation of this (political) finitude can be related to finitude of utterance that is patterned into the lyric form.

As before, it is the element of temporality in lyric which helps us to explicate this common sense of finitude. Throughout the following selection of poems, Auden's

²⁸⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 242.

²⁸⁷ Kateb, *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 134.

speakers are exercised, as they have been previously, by the confusion between the public and private realms. More specifically, the removal or loss of a stable public realm in the modern age is the source of an anxiety for permanence (in its own way a conditioning factor in the rise of totalitarianism in the late twenties and thirties), which in turn animates the lyric speaker to evoke a greater, and greatly dislocating, sense of finitude. So the practice of reading these poems prefigures Arendt's point:

It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time. Through many ages before us – but now not any more – men entered the public realm because they wanted something of their own or something they had in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives.... There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality,...²⁸⁸

The modern political moment, as attested in lyric, is the cogent expression of such finitude. What we see in Auden's political lyrics, predictably given the time of their composition, is the vestigial ethos of Enlightenment optimism regarding the sanctity of the public realm and the instructive purpose of history effectively facing the sunset of its truth value. Crucially, the temporal element of lyric vocality – the sense we have of an unfolding utterance which we in turn speak for ourselves – secures our understanding of the experience of this tectonic shift, making our involvement active rather than passive. The speakers of the poems (and this is why a critical approach based exclusively on Auden himself might be too selective) each inhabit a singular, finite moment in the process of confronting the collapse, or perhaps, mutation, of the public realm. They might, as in "Control of the passes", render this confrontation in a third person minor narrative, a quasi-dramatic account that manipulates the poetics of the sonnet; they might, as in "Get there if you can", perform a kind of imaginative osmosis, the speaker himself becoming the recipient of a dissipated cultural energy; they might, as in "Consider this and in our time", survey the new ground of collective life through the lens of myth, as it collides with Enlightenment rationality; they might, as in "Journey to Iceland", describe, reveal and scrutinise the motion of their historical presuppositions; they might, as in "Spain 1937", actively inhabit the moment of political decision in adherence to a cause knowing full well that its

²⁸⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 55.

objectives are transient; they might, as in “September 1, 1939”, illustrate the problems in trying to resurrect or re-imagine the vanished public sphere.

Though this grouping of poems forms a broad spectrum, we can describe their common basis. Arendt’s notion of plurality as the safeguard of politics is her own configuration of the fundamental question about historical existence which she derives from Heidegger, the question of *mitsein*: “who am I with?” In this sense, when she uses the term politics in passing, to refer to the manner of government, she is simply offering a specified formulation of this selfsame question. Each of the lyric poems given close attention in this chapter can be deemed political for the singular way in which it exposes the nature of thinking about coexistence: about collective life and the role of the individual living upon constantly tremulous ground in twentieth century modernity. We are shown that thinking the nature of modern politics is first thinking the nature of modern finitude, not simply as a matter of theme (though this may well be the case), but precisely because each poem stands alone²⁸⁹ and finally resists submersion into a chronology of whatever type; and because the process of speaking the lyric aloud affords us a sharper understanding of its temporality. So I do not select these lyrics by arguing that their *content* is Arendtian, that is, by seeking to illustrate how they might advocate, at the level of argument, the plural basis of politics. This would foreclose their meaning. Rather, as (spoken) lyrics overtly concerned with the question of coexistence, they can be said to chime with the privilege that Arendt extends to speaking. As a result the readings are historically attuned to the particularity of Auden’s time, but finally rooted in respect for their singular, generative capacity.

Focusing on the vocalicity of lyric in this wider political context means allows us to expand our sense of what constitutes the political in Auden’s work. Where the mode of a lyric is transparently argumentative, or seems to exposit a point of view that we could classify according to political dogma, then a critical response is self-explanatory. For instance, in “Brothers, who when the sirens roar”, written in August

²⁸⁹ William Waters remarks (*Poetry’s Touch*, 5) that the brevity of lyric is such that it appears “without disambiguating context.” This apparent freedom from context is especially illuminating in a political setting: at this historical juncture the suspension of clear context (often noted as a key feature of the Audenesque) projects the sense of finitude that also characterises the political moment. The poetic moment and the political decision both stand alone and share this finitude: “Spain 1937” will pursue this similarity.

1932 (and later disowned by its author) the rehearsal of hopes for the proletariat is the lyric's *raison d'être* (*The English Auden*, 120-123):

Brothers, who when the sirens roar
From office, shop and factory pour
 'Neath evening sky;
By cops directed to the fug
Of talkie-houses for a drug,
Or down canals to find a hug
Until you die:

We know, remember, what it is
That keeps you celebrating this
 Sad ceremonial;
We know the terrifying brink
From which in dreams you nightly shrink.
"I shall be sacked without", you think,
 "A testimonial".

Even here the sense of rehearsal is so pronounced as to verge on the theatrical, complicating the tone of the poem. It seems to have a stronger affinity with Auden's light verse, particularly when castigating the "splendid person" for their arrogance ("The future kissed you, called you king, / Did she? Deceiver!"). Perhaps this seemingly throwaway piece is also marked by its questionable origin: does the tone of levity indicate a lack of sincerity? Is it merely trying out the voice of politicking as a kind of representative satire? Does this point towards a deeper critical problem regarding the ascription of sincerity, or the lack of it, to a lyric? The rather laboured posturing of the poem tells its own story: Auden realised through such experiments that poetry was not suited to hectoring. But his expurgation of such crucial works as "Spain 1937" and "September 1, 1939" is surely over-sensitive to this, and the depth of vocal presence in such works justifies their inclusion here. Auden's attempts at canon-cleansing are only marginally important to a critical project which is specifically interested in what the singular moment involves. For all its flaws, "Brothers, who when the sirens roar" is attuned to what Arendt calls "behaviourism". In modern society, we recall, behaviour replaces action as the crucible of human endeavour:

It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.²⁹⁰

As we have seen in Chapter Two, Auden’s early thematic preoccupation with the silent coercion of a faceless majority, and the catastrophic consequences for the inner life, demonstrate eloquently enough how alive is his work to the conditioning factors of thinking. But the matter becomes more complex when we consider the political in the Arendtian sense, of what modes of coexistence are made available at a given historical point. In some examples such as “Get there if you can” the polemical thrust that powers the lyric aims directly at this question. But the real value of Auden’s lyrics (and my close readings have been selected because of this) lies in their continual ability to show the thinking process behind the utterance: the background of thought, the accretions of historical modes of thinking and living, and their collisions with newer modes, which together amount to their manner of perception.

In its interest in preconditions, this approach to the political in Auden is of Heideggerian method, logically enough given the influence of his thought on Arendt. It aims to convey what is at once behind expression and within expression. Still, we must be cautious. As with Arendt, simply to read into the lyrics examples of Heideggerian premises would be reductive; I do not refer Auden to any final philosophical arbitration. Firstly, then, where Heidegger is useful relates to the philosopher’s defining statements on the nature of art’s singularity. Heidegger’s contention in “Origin”, that “What went before is refuted in its exclusive actuality by the work”²⁹¹, accounts for the way that the artwork goes beyond its conditioning factors (biography, history, culture) to make the new circulation of truth possible. What we see in lyrics such as “Spain 1937”, for example, is a kind of confluence between the imperatives of revolutionary politics and those of generative, inaugural art; between the political and lyric moments. Heidegger does not mean that the artwork disavows the past, but that the “exclusive reality” of what has conditioned the artwork has been exceeded by the experience that the artwork makes possible. So the

²⁹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40.

²⁹¹ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 200.

past is ever-present as a purposive force, one which makes possible both the political moment of adherence to cause and the moment of lyric insight. The lyric is the vessel of the past where human affairs, the stuff of politics, retain their presence for thinking the demands of the present.

This philosophical lexicon ought not to detract from the poems themselves, and it is clear that Auden's is not an art which turns away from human affairs, in order to better record their nature: quite the contrary. His political poems are valuable because (as "Spain 1937" perhaps will best exemplify) they are frequently pitched into the breach between that which is historically inherited or conditioned and what is within the realm of the speaker's agency, in the very entanglements of the world. In their vocal, finite quality they describe the beginnings of the political moment; in their ideas and argument they address how it can be manifested. It is this, their three-hundred-and-sixty-degree aspect, their glance backwards and forwards, which we can call Heideggerian because it is redolent of the breadth that Heidegger sees in the realisation of the finite moment of thinking. The spoken lyric is the artistic realisation of the contingency of thought, and Auden's political lyrics explore this in significant depth.

The political moment, we will see, takes account of the expanse of its conditioning factors, and according to the conventions of lyric, this expanse is compressed. It is here that I invoke Adorno's conceptual framework, again with a number of caveats. As I stated in Chapter One, I follow Adorno's thesis that lyric instates a truth that is supra-subjective. The measure of its objectivity lies in precisely the manner that it recounts its conditioning factors: how the objective has been submerged, and is processed by the subjective. Furthermore, although my readings are concerned to describe the historical milieu in which the lyrics were created, Adorno's arguments are instructive for their neat balance between the singular and the historical, a balance which is salutary in the context of political poetry, where the historical threatens to dominate:

Lyric poetry is not to be deduced from society; its social content is precisely its spontaneity, which does not follow from the conditions of the moment. But philosophy (again that of Hegel) knows the

speculative proposition that the individual is rendered through the general and *vice versa*. This can only mean here that resistance to social pressure is not something absolutely individual.²⁹²

Peter Porter reminded us earlier that the question of what belongs to history and what belongs to the poem is misleading,²⁹³ and Adorno's position reserves a place within the experience of lyric where the reductive historical approach cannot intrude: this is the mark of art's singularity. His move is to claim this place as evidence of art's resistance to "social pressure". Where Adorno sees a representative spontaneity – an expression of opposition in lyric that, ipso facto, must be general – we can divine another way of involving the activity of reading lyric poetry in a context that exceeds the aesthetic. The spontaneity that excites Adorno is activated in speaking the lyric, and by configuring the lyric as being spoken to us. Here Adorno's critique and Arendt's authentic politics coincide. Whether the poem is monodic or choral, the colloquy installed has symbolic value as an emblem of the speaking, which amounts to what MacNeice called in 1938 "a tiny measure of contribution" in *Modern Poetry*; a gesture of communication - sometimes compromised - between poem and reader. We can easily put an Adornian construction on the vocality of lyric, without subscribing to Adorno's essentially negative reading of how art is experienced in twentieth century modernity. Hence Adorno's description of the lyric quality of crystallisation (how it attests to its historical shape) will again be invoked in close readings, but at all times with respect for what the particular meeting between page and voice preserves of its spontaneous moment. From this basis, the life of each lyric and their respective political natures can be better conveyed.

II – Political Lyrics

"Control of the Passes was, he saw, the key": January 1928. *The English Auden*, 25.

The formal peculiarity of this early poem presents us with the most inviting explanation of its significance. A sonnet that foregoes the first person, and that veils

²⁹² Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society", *The Adorno Reader*, 217.

²⁹³ Peter Porter, *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, 129.

its musicality in favour of a novelistic third person narrative, “Control of the Passes” sketches a version of political life by proxy. The notes of intimacy that traditionally colour the sonnet form – those characteristic suggestions of self-exposure – are denied us here. Having elected to use the third person, Auden confuses our grounding with the sonnet. Where, or who, we ask, is the addressee of the poem? This is our “key”, as readers, to the “new district” availed by the poem, though the fate of the agent himself, whose confusions are parabolic, allows no such success.

The first quatrain suggests that the poem has dismantled such a channel of address; it has, through the figure of the agent, a vacuum as its addressee: the agent’s absent fellow men, and by extension, we the readers:

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the old trap
For a bogus guide, seduced with the old tricks.

The “new district” might present of a new way of being-with to the beleaguered spy, a more substantial mode of human interaction that could correct his current self-inflicted isolation. But his lexicon, his mother tongue, is the source and function of this isolation. It is rational, inquisitive and acquisitive (“Control...the key /who would get it?”). “Control of the Passes” dramatises in miniature the way in which quantification and rationalisation (“old tricks”, stalwarts of the Enlightenment) continue to shape the character of modern consciousness, and most perilously, modern notions of communal life. The artistry of the poem lies in its carefully concealed music which, juxtaposed with the neutrality of the third person narrative, hints at the defining anxiety of a life trapped in an inherited subjectivity. The subtly chiming vowel shapes and sounds (“trained spy....bogus guide”) do not awkwardly disrupt the cool-headed narration of the agent’s dilemma; rather, they pass below it barely noticed, as if encased under ice.

In the imaginative logic of the poem, the rationalising epoch breeds isolation which in turn breeds opposition and conflict. Conflict is the practice that collates with the theory of the rational subject born into the lineage of the Enlightenment. The extended metaphor at work in “Control of the Passes” recounts through the agent’s

situation and failed mission the recent history of human technological advances and mastery of nature:

At Greenhearth was a fine site for a dam
And easy power, had they pushed the rail
Some stations nearer. They ignored his wires.
The bridges were unbuilt and trouble coming.

The very operation of this metaphor contains the crux of modern isolated subjectivity. The metaphor takes the macro – the language and attitude of instrumental thinking – and has it represent psychic minutiae. There is a kind of inversion at work here: an erasure of the particular by the power of the general. In doing so, the poem conveys the unsustainable paradox of the subjectivity in question; we can read “Control of the passes” as a eulogy for the inner life. Yet, again, the agent’s perspective is one instance of the essential problem. The agent assumes the problem to be one of mere positioning (“had they pushed the rail / Some stations nearer”); if human effort were more fully exerted, the acquisition of more power and greater mastery would suffice. Alternatively, the agent’s desire to connect (and the fact that his communications are ignored) suggests his more profound understanding of the cause of conflict. This aspect accounts for those readings which see the poem as self-commentary, the agent representing the poet.²⁹⁴ In sustaining both alternatives the narration emphasizes the incisive power of the lyric to crystallise, in the Adornian manner, an epochal contradiction. But the adumbrating problem is always the question of being-with: how to analyse its current failure, and how to imagine other, more rewarding ways of communal living.

The *volta* of the sonnet is employed by Auden to bring forth a new intensity, as in the climactic sextet we are given a deeper psychological insight into the agent’s situation:

The street music seemed gracious now to one
For weeks up in the desert. Woken by water

²⁹⁴ Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (1995; repr., London: Vintage, 2003), 262. “Auden’s early metaphor for a poet had been the secret agent, a subversive who exists for the transmission of ideas across borders and whose pretences for being an ordinary person are mimicry.”

Running away in the dark, he often had
Reproached the night for a companion
Dreamed of already. They would shoot, of course,
Parting easily who were never joined.

Human culture, the vibrancy of the “street music”, strikes the agent at an aesthetic distance, lending him no greater insight or involvement, and is experienced as a curious interlude within his dreamlike subjectivity. Indeed, the music seems to emanate independent of any human source, and shares an obscure provenance with “they”. The agent is posed with a non-choice, between a half life lived in the service of “them”, or a flight into the darkness, following the water (it is unclear whether the subject of the third line is the “water” or the agent himself). The cryptic role of the dreamed companion can only be explicated in the agent’s death. To shoot him would be to shoot someone else too: the companion is the (imagined) source of human connection that each isolated subject potentially inhabits. “Control of the Passes” is parabolic, then. It is the symbolic moral imperative of the surrogate – that I could be you, and you could be me – ultimately embodied by the agent. In his fate we see this squandered and denied. Auden’s interpolation of the last line of the Anglo Saxon poem “Wulf and Eadwacer” - “Parting easily who were never joined”²⁹⁵ - becomes a droll commentary on this irony, and echoes the jaundiced, cynical desperation which the first quatrain offered. Potential is not enough: there seems to be no answer to the double-bind that isolated, rationalising subjects and their correlative insistence on power together create. “Control of the Passes” suggests that the politics of mass society is predicated on the removal or invalidation of any middle ground between the stringently subjective (which means isolation) and the implacable objective (which means self-denial or subjugation). The ease with which the poem traverses the two comprises its final importance. Seamlessly woven together into a perceptual whole in the poem, this traffic between subjective and objective is exactly the kind of freedom which is precluded for the agent. In mimetic terms, the lyric’s perception imitates a wish, then, rather than reality. In speaking the lyric reader becomes narrator, implicated in the deadly paradox of the agent’s situation. We recall what the sonnet form entails: the complicated marriage of proximity to and distance from the reader

²⁹⁵ Richard Hamer ed., *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 85. The original closing lines are translated by Hamer: “Men very easily may put asunder / That which was never joined, our song together.”

contained in “Control of the Passes” signifies an early success for Auden in reworking established forms to more accurately diagnose the nature of modern collective life.

“Get there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own” - April 1930.
The English Auden, 48-49.

Does a viable mode of action, understood in Hannah Arendt’s sense, subsist in the age of mass society? Can we find such a mode from among the husks of mere “behaviour”, action’s modern-day progeny? What roads are open to those who would intervene, or seek to change their circumstances? “Get there if you can” presents an interesting test case for these questions. The poem confirms Auden’s preoccupation with the psychological realm as the locus of political change, and in doing so declares his intellectual allegiance to “behaviour”, at least by proxy. It is, however, a fraught allegiance. In its pronominal shape – which lurches between a vocative address to a general “you”, and exhortative pleas to better “our” condition – the poem rehearses a series of ways of being-with, where all are determined by a perceived crisis. Crisis galvanises and polarises simultaneously, and the panoply of collectives presented by the lyric, whether psychological, economic, historical or intellectual, would seem to comprise a range of possibilities that the speaker is attempting to surpass. In this sense the lyric could be said to have other, less local targets than the “puritan middle class” identified by John Fuller;²⁹⁶ more ambitiously, it imitates the processes by which mass society continually divides its internal components. So again, we have a poem seeking a solution to a problem that it unwittingly perpetuates. The lyric’s characteristic energy typifies the restless will to differentiate which is a symptom of the behavioural paradigm. In its pace, then, “Get there if you can” represents the labile speed of those societal divisions which work against any fixity of being-with, even as it aims to challenge them, offering a gesture of desperate defiance realised in the long, stalking line borrowed from Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall Sixty Years After.”²⁹⁷ As we speak them, the range of vowel sounds seems to be exhausted by each line (“Power-stations locked, deserted, since they drew the boiler fires;”); pace

²⁹⁶ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 70.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

takes precedence over internal music, the pointed full rhymes cement each couplet as a stand-alone rhetorical attack. “Get there if you can” is a mass society choral poem *par excellence*: its togetherness is contingent upon impending trauma or disaster, and is given by a historical inheritance that persists only insofar as it limits or constrains the individual in the present.

The visual emphasis of the opening couplets, their litany of industrial collapse and entropy, is one of the most memorable instances of the oft-remarked cinematic quality of Auden’s early work. Yet the elemental point here – which is much more tangible when we speak the poem – is the imaginative pollination of vitality, from the abandoned workplaces, the “Smokeless chimneys” and “rotting wharves”, to the speaker as seer. This vitality is manifest in the pace of the lines. It is as though the memory of such concerted activity and purpose exists virtually now, in the speaker’s account, as it happens. Its pace affords the lyric a sense of discrete occasion, which is another way of putting what John Bayley calls Auden’s “stylishness”.²⁹⁸ Style is the instatement of the lyric moment. The speaker’s ersatz possession of that cultural energy is a reclamation of inheritance through the force of imagination, now that it cannot be possessed in real terms (“...the land you once were proud to own”). When we speak the lines aloud the effect of their pace is irresistible, and we receive an intimation of the kind of vigour which the speaker is desperately trying to revive. Herein lies the true value of Auden’s early lyrics: through their vocality, they frequently testify to the perceptual force of an imagination seeking to surpass its own “behaviour”. Images of access pursue this trajectory; the speaker attempts to enter the edifice of industrial history in search of a stronger mode of possession than the virtual:

Squeeze into the works through broken windows or through damp-sprung doors;
See the rotted shafting, see holes gaping in the upper floors;

All we can do, though, is “see”: the imperatives possess the force of command and, conversely, a note of defeat. But Auden is already demonstrating that in mass society observation stands in the place of action. In twentieth century modernity it is, at the very least, bestowed with a new kind of purposive weight. The lyric can reveal this

²⁹⁸ John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival*, 130.

weight. Seeing cannot be said to be entirely passive: it has significance which is politically active, if we define the political as encompassing the perceptual change (here the transition of cultural to imaginative activity) which might then orientate a call for action or force a decision: the backward glance before the forward.

If the collective here is bound by a common lack, and seems to be specifically generational (the young whose cultural and financial security has been squandered), then the next sequence of couplets expands to include all kinds of profligates. The same impetus with which the dead industrial activity is virtually preserved by voice encourages the continual inclusion of others into a shape-shifting collective. It is not that all are included at once: on the contrary, Fuller's argument that the poem concerns the "puritan middle class" is entirely justified. It is rather that the lyric, through its adaptable pronouns, demonstrates how a collective might include and exclude in a discrete historical situation in order to define itself, in an ongoing, provisional way. The privations incurred at the hands of free market economics ("While they quietly undersold us with their cheaper trade abroad;") have bestowed a halcyon glow on the previous period of consumer security ("At the theatre, playing tennis, driving motor-cars we had"). Now, apparently at the time of cultural expiration, the speaker can list those betrayers who form a genealogy of bourgeois thinking, including the world-historical and the personal:

Newman, Ciddy, Plato, Fronny, Pascal, Bowdler, Baudelaire,
Doctor Frommer, Mrs. Allom, Freud, the Baron, and Flaubert.

The combination of the renowned and the obscure serves a special kind of purpose, regardless of whether we know who "Mrs. Allom" might be, for instance. Figures from the personal life play an equal role in defining what is inexorably given to the subject: "Ciddy", "Fronny" et al remain uncannily familiar. In its kinetic style the poem is actively constructing a history for those included in the collective, those who feels themselves addressed by the vocative "you" and implicated by the "us". With a Hegelian flourish, "Get there if you can" suggests that this history is finally being described at the point of the cultural expiration. The couplet above is notable for the curious music it acquires through its concentrated internal rhymes: a note of the

ridiculous is entirely congenial to the extreme pace that propels the lyric onward (Stan Smith classes the poem as light verse, borrowing Joyce's term "jocoserious")²⁹⁹.

The speaker pursues his narrative without pause. Intellectual history, the dyad of science and art ("compelling logic", "beauty of their verse"), and the principle of example on which society is based have precluded the choice of "life" ("Very well, believe it, copy, til your hair is white as theirs.") The lyric struggles to imagine what kind of action might be possible, or whether the cycle of behaviour must be uprooted psychologically. At this impasse the speaker finds the most lucid image for compromised togetherness:

Intimate as war-time prisoners in an isolation camp,
Living month by month together, nervy, famished, lousy, damp.

On the sopping esplanade or from our dingy lodgings we
Stare out dully at the rain which falls for miles into the sea.

Under the terms of mass society, where does my freedom to be-with reside? These couplets comprise the high point of the lyric, where intellectual force is given an emotional charge beyond the declamatory. The image realises the backward glance – the retrospective construction of history at its expiration – as "we / Stare out dully at the rain...", but is rescued from the abstract by the grim familiarity of the "sopping esplanade" and "dingy lodgings". The cumulative weight of history is looked upon hopelessly. This is a suitable note on which to end, but the gravity of these lines urges the speaker to more questions: where are the messiahs, what role for the visionary in mass society? "Lawrence, Blake and Homer Lane, once healers in our English land", each pioneered their unique oppositional eccentricity, but their respective fates confirmed the victory of behaviourism. The law of the mass is equalisation and so impotence: "Have things gone too far already? Are we done for? Must we wait..." The climax of the lyric gestures toward the milieu of political extremism that Auden and his generation orbited, but this point is secondary. The real value of "Get there if you can" resides in its irresistible logic, tapped afresh as we speak it, which veers towards total collapse: the point at which reactionary politics becomes most appealing, perhaps. There is an explicit awareness of the essential passivity of the

²⁹⁹ Stan Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, 100-101

democratic collective here (“Must we wait”), though the sentiments, almost theatricalised, are anti-democratic to the point of parody:

Or, in friendly fireside circle, sit and listen for the crash
Meaning that the mob has realised something’s up, and start to smash;

Engine-drivers with their oil-cans, factory girls in overalls
Blowing sky-high monster stores, destroying intellectuals?

The intellectual panic at the onset of mass politics is a common trope of histories of modernism; these lines are a *coup de theatre* of bourgeois intellectual paranoia. For the time, though, the lyric is actually sustained by question marks over its sincerity: they contribute appropriately to the variety of tones and registers which defies reduction to doxa. Such variety captures the clashing registers of collective life, its depths as well as its trivialities – its limit points. The commands at the finale of the lyric – “Drop those priggish ways forever, stop behaving like a stone:” – cannot overcome a residual pessimism that amounts to bravura indifference to the fate of the collective:

If we really want to live, we’d better start at once to try;
If we don’t it doesn’t matter, but we’d better start to die.

The hopes for psychology, as the potential sphere of a new kind of action, are tempered by its status as a prominent wing of the behavioural sciences. Nevertheless it remains here the only possible recourse for understanding, and possibly altering, the terms of collective life. Similarly to “Control of the Passes”, the lyric itself, as the repository of virtual energy, capable of reconfiguring collective life in its imaginative ways of being-with, elicits in its workings a freedom beyond the reach of the lone voice.

“Consider this and in our time”: March 1930. *The English Auden*, 46-47.

Together with “Get there if you can”, “Consider this and in our time” has been seen to represent a sea change in Auden’s work: the point at which his poetry began to situate itself more convincingly in relation to its historical surroundings.³⁰⁰ It is clear that there is a new kind of significance here, in its quality of perception, as well as in what we can loosely term its ideas. Indeed, the two are arranged in an opposition which merits the term difficult, in George Steiner’s “ontological” sense.³⁰¹ For instance, the opening lines of the lyric introduce the cinematic zoom:

Consider this and in our time
As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:
The clouds rift suddenly – look there
At cigarette-end smouldering on a border
At the first garden party of the year.

I intuit that this opening extends further than its invitingly neutral tone might first suggest, and the poem will come to depend for its significance on the way in which we are implicated in what is being described and criticised. What is the nature of this voice; where does it come from? With its unhurried, conversational expansiveness, achieved by lines that centre around decasyllabic regularity, it is the voice of modern public address, whose impersonality is anything but objective, and recalls at once the editor or commentator (“in our time”), the host or guide (“Pass on, admire the view...”), even the political acolyte or group member (“Join there the insufficient units...”). Each is more subtly insistent, we feel, than the last; a rising intensity of focus mimetically represents how the individual reader might actually be led into the nexus of collective society in the modern age. The cinematic mode of perception only acquires a distinguishing quality, then, if we appreciate the verbs which follow it as implied imperatives. They form the concatenation which leads us into the heart of the lyric.

³⁰⁰ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 88; during this period Auden is said to have “enlarged his vocabulary to accommodate a wide range of contemporary objects, the bric-à-brac of the twentieth century.”

³⁰¹ George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, 41.

I do not sense that the cinematic, Hardy-esque overview pursues impersonal objectivity, as Anthony Hecht implies,³⁰² much less instates it for the reader. “Consider this and in our time” exemplifies a thematically apposite complication, one that relates to the cross purposes between tone (which might induce the sense of impersonal objectivity) and its contrary subtext, here manifested in diction. Those imperatives give the game away: from “consider” to “join” we can trace a descent from the general to the particular, echoing the first image of descent from the hawk’s and airman’s view to the focus on the smouldering cigarette-end. The opener, “Consider”, is bland and neutral, flattering even; but “join” is loaded with significance and implication. Seemingly without tangible origin but in fact rooted in the elision of personal responsibility encouraged by the Ur-voice of mass society, this implication describes the nature of modern political involvement.

As we speak it, then, our implicated utterance of the lyric is a riposte to the cold admiration of the “view of the massif”, to the nullity of the “efficient band” that supplies feelings, and to the void between the entertained guests and the “farmers and their dogs”. What seems impersonal is in fact firmly within the grasp of the reader’s personal experience of public social life. What we are ultimately asked to “consider” by the lyric is precisely this manner of one’s implication “in our time”. The poetics of the first strophe point towards such implication just as, at first glance, they reassure us of our self-possession.

The structure of the poem is tripartite. After the veiled implications of the first stanza with its itinerary of contemporary locations, the second stanza responds to the evocation of the modern experience with the insinuation of myth. The third completes the lyric by conflating the mythic and the modern, where the mythic retains a crucial vestigial role in shaping the collective imagination. The second stanza begins with an act of supplication unbecoming the cool, measured voice of the first:

Long ago, supreme Antagonist,
More powerful than the great northern whale
Ancient and sorry at life’s limiting defect,
In Cornwall, Mendip, or the Pennine moor
Your comments on the highborn mining-captains,

³⁰² Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 332.

Found they no answer, made them wish to die
-Lie since in barrows out of harm.

This sestet, and its curious adjoined coda, revives the kind of dislocating poetics (particularly confusion as to the subject of a clause, and parataxis) that Auden had mastered in the late twenties, before more comprehensible lines return. In the mythic world described, with the “supreme Antagonist” orchestrating despair through his “comments”, an archaic, pre-rational mentality is introduced that comes to fruition in the final verse. Here the mythic serves as a prelude, being largely rhetorical in detailing particular places (“Cornwall, Mendip, or the Pennine moor”) and their strange occupants (“the high-born mining captains”).

Two orders of meaning in the poem begin to bifurcate here. First, there is the thematic idea of the Antagonist and his fatal comments. Second, evident in the detail of the lyric’s diction and rhetorical effects, there is the history of mythic-to-modern perception. Auden renders this history as a vocal presence, in the form of the lone voice of the Antagonist. This voice is a binding force, and a divisive one. I read the second stanza as a rehearsal of total collective involvement, of a common fate whose language and presentation is informed by myth. The Antagonist speaks in the abandoned places of industry (“silted harbours, derelict works”) and in “a silent comb / Where dogs have worried and a bird was shot”. Here, as in “Get there if you can”, the past has effectively been returned to life, through the voice. In this context, however, such a cast of thought is apparently pre-rational and mythic. Furthermore the true nature of the voice of the first strophe becomes clearer in retrospect. In the tension between tone and diction the opening sketched an evacuated present, which the second strophe imagines being filled by the resurgence of the past in a destructive upsurge of primal force. The poem visualises the immolation of history, and the apocalyptic bent of its climatic section becomes a fantasy of vengeance. The only inhabited present is that of leisure:

Visit the ports and, interrupting
The leisurely conversation in the bar
Within a stone’s throw of the sunlit water,
Beckon your chosen out. Summon...

The Antagonist's interruption is a rebuke to the "leisurely" and their cheapened lives. This chimes with the "plate-glass windows of the Sport Hotel"; leisure seems to invite destruction as its twin. Again the alteration in diction attests to the modernised mythic perception residing in the lyric: "Beckon your chosen out" and "Summon" belong to an ancient register of myth and ritual, which is made uncanny by elements of relative modernity such as "solitary agents", and "mobilise the powerful forces".

What might the "rumour" started by the Antagonist be? In its consequences it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: "a polar peril, a prodigious alarm". The quality of perception underlying the imagery is manifest:

Scattering the people, as torn-up paper
Rags and utensils in a sudden gust,
Seized with immeasurable neurotic dread.

The terrible proximity is revealed: the commonality of fates which cements rationalised, deracinated collective life. This is the truth of the "rumour". "Consider this and in our time" is an apocalyptic imagining of a political reality, and mythic perception presents the forms and language most appropriate to it. The concluding strophe channels the prophetic vision, locating the source of the inevitable "explosion of mania" or "classic fatigue" in the individual act ("...all who follow / The convolutions of your simple wish,"). The section of the stanza excised by Auden for the *Collected Poems*,³⁰³ but included in *The English Auden*, may have been culled for its obvious politicking, but the transition we see in the original – from the accusatory, political resentment of the "Financier" and the Professors, to pseudo-Millennial predictions in "It is later than you think; nearer that day" – is perfectly apt as another instance of the compound of the modern and the mythic. (That said, as it appears in the *Collected Poems* the strophe perhaps tessellates more neatly with its predecessors.) The familiarly contemporary coolness of tone at the poem's opening is developed into something like a soothsayer's foreboding: "You cannot be away, then, no / Not though you leave to pack with the hour". Equally, the specialised medical vocabulary of "fugues", "Irregular breathing" and "alternate ascendancies" is a

³⁰³ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 61-62.

convincing addition to the earlier combination of modern registers. Having visualised collective destruction, the final fate described by the lyric is individual:

After some haunted migratory years
To disintegrate on an instant in the explosion of mania
Or lapse forever into a classic fatigue.

The collective of “Consider this and in our time” is united in its subjection to this latent illness, but each man must bear the burden of collectively determined fate alone. The lyric has exposed the reader to the primal scene of collective life, rehearsing, switching and merging registers and voices that cohere and compel as a harrowing form of modern mythic perception.

“Journey to Iceland”: July 1936. *Collected Poems*, 149-151.

What does the visitor bring with them? How does the interloper, the foreigner, come to see their destination? These seemingly apolitical questions are posed by the speaker of “Journey to Iceland” through a description of the encounter between the preconceived and the real, and between versions of the past and versions of the present. This is evidently a “condition of Europe” lyric, and not simply because it is prompted by the European malaise of the mid-thirties. We can read “Journey to Iceland” as an unfolding consideration of the grounds for political thinking, exposed to the reader in real-time; singular in its explicit confrontation of how collective experience struggles to transcend its preconditions.

The difference between *The English Auden* (203-204) and the *Collected Poems* versions of the poem lies chiefly in their respective openings: the former carries a greater sense of immediate involvement (“And the traveller hopes...”), the latter a greater sense of inclusion characterising that immediacy. I favour the latter on these grounds:

Each traveller prays *Let me be far from any
physician*, every port has its name for the sea,
the citiless, the corroding, the sorrow,
and North means to all, *Reject*.

Plagued by semi-colons in the earlier version, here the stanza has an impressionistic feel which is more congenial to recitation. “(T)he citiless, the corroding, the sorrow” serve to insinuate the European inflection to this manner of perceiving from the start; the line evokes the background of privation and decline that has found its response in the inclusiveness and the attunement to the local (“every port has its name for the sea”). The emphatic “*Reject*” is placed as the culmination of the stanza; it is the command that is to be tested for its viability. Can Europe, and its historical legacy, be rejected? Such a sentiment will soon be uttered explicitly; for now the excitement of arrival leads the speaker into bold declamations, and the conjecture of permanence and security in the austere landscape: “These planes are for ever where cold creatures are hunted / and on all sides: white wings flicker and flaunt;”. The speaker’s real-time account of the new environment, though convincingly spontaneous, is seemingly filtered through a haze of expectations and preconceptions. This leads us to ask, can any place be “for ever”, given that we see in the same way the lyric sees?

The speaking reader recognises their own habits of intentional perception in the partiality of the speaker’s excitement, in its quasi-ecstatic moment. The third stanza confirms this in “his limited hope”, acknowledging some restraint, some qualification to its own sentiments. Still, the “sterile immature mountains”, unencumbered with the usual symbolism of potency and ancientness, suggest belief in a different historical relationship between people and their environment. It is a relationship apparently unencumbered by history also (rich though the history is, as Edward Mendelson avers).³⁰⁴ The “traveller” of the first stanza becomes the “citizen”, as though the speaker has now verbally identified the conditioning history behind the lyric’s vision: the vision of the city, a fallen way of seeing. The comparatively safer, readily accessible history of Iceland – of its eminences (“the bath of a great historian”) and saga actors (“the old woman confessing *He that I loved the / best, to him I was worst*”) – is arranged in paraphrase across these lines. The speaker seems to

³⁰⁴ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 341.

confront this erroneous enthusiasm first by justifying it, and then correcting the imaginative simplification:

Europe is absent: this is an island and should be
a refuge, where the affections of its dead can be bought
by those whose dreams accuse them of being
spitefully alive, and the pale

from too much passion of kissing feel pure is in deserts.
But is it, can they, as the world is and can lie?

The effect is striking. At this point in the trajectory of his thinking, the speaker has turned to face the operations of the thinking head on, recognising his potential to exclude truth in the intensity of his focus. It is through the representation of these blind-spots in thought that Auden's lyrics must be understood as political at the pre-conditional, rather than the overt stage. We are shown the testimony of the moment, with all its sins of omission and overemphasis. This is the nature of the political investment in embryo: it is a way of selecting and arranging given aspects of the collective life: the necessary, though unavoidably costly process that defines perception itself.

Where humans reside, the speaker now insists, human afflictions reside also. The success of the volte-face in the lyric's sentiments (where the perennially "simple and recognisable treacheries" of life are admitted)³⁰⁵ coheres because the visions of human fallibility are imagined with the same perceptual force as were those of escape:

A narrow bridge over a torrent,
a small farm under a crag

are natural settings for the jealousies of a province:
a weak vow of fidelity is made at a cairn,

The italicised voice does indeed ask "all our questions". It mimics the same pattern of thought as the lyric has elaborated up to this point, in a kind of imaginative feedback:

³⁰⁵ Barbara Everett, *Auden* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd Press, 1964), 61.

“Where is the homage? When / shall justice be done? Who is against me? / Why am I always alone?” Where the opening stanzas were fired the excitement of arrival, so the destination is reached and a first fundamental question is asked: where is the homage, homage being reverence for what has been? Our thinking is backward-facing from the first, and already implicated. When shall justice be done, justice being the putting right of history’s wrongs? The “indigenous figure” who utters these questions describes the exact concatenation of logic that defines being one among many. The final stanzas seem to offer the decisive correction to the philosophical presupposition of the lyric regarding space and time:

Our time has no favourite suburb, no local features
are those of the young for whom all wish to care;
its promise is only a promise, the fabulous
country impartially far.

Tears fall in all the rivers: again some driver
pulls on his gloves and in a blinding snowstorm starts
upon a fatal journey, again some writer
runs howling to his art.

There are no exemptions, in time or space, from history and its legacy in human culture; moreover idealisation is the always the confrere of lives conditioned by time and space (the “promise”, an agreement determined temporally, is an emblem of time; the “fabulous country”, imagining the perfect space uncontaminated by human affairs, an emblem of space). Auden conjures a fitting resonance between the opening and closing stanzas with a reversal of the tone and imagery of optimistic universalism (“Tears fall in all the rivers...”). We are left with the repetition of woe and the repetition of the doomed attempt to transcend it, in both the driver’s “fatal journey” and the writer’s retreat into art. From the levity of its initial stages through to its humbled, disconsolate conclusion, “Journey to Iceland” traces a confrontation with the preconditions of thinking, and names the centrality of the question “Who am I with” to human affairs.

“Spain 1937”: April 1937. *The English Auden*, 210-212.

The controversy surrounding “Spain 1937”, and its creator’s famous change of heart about its sentiments,³⁰⁶ need not detain our attempt to communicate its full importance. Indeed, such continuing discussions pertain, quite correctly, to the merit of the ideas about political expediency the poem puts forth.³⁰⁷ As my approach has already tried to demonstrate, a richer sense of the poem’s life can only be rendered if we appreciate how it is a lyric: that is, how such ideas emerge through the encounter between the page and the speaking reader. Of course, with such an emotive historical event for its subject, there can be no downgrading the importance of the ideas underpinning the piece. Sentiments or ideas are the lifeblood of politics, and so circulate as the irreducible material of the political lyric. Yet the experience of reading “Spain 1937” is more complex and more involved. When we read the poem we are peering into the inchoate stuff of the moment of political decision, a sense that too strongly belies its poise, complicating its self-supported certainties (those which so angered Orwell, for instance). This reading would not amount to a refutation of Auden’s perceived over-simplicity at the lyric’s conclusion, but censuring its ideas would overlook a good deal of its interest. If, in the opprobrium he received, Auden paid the price for his irresponsibility with “Spain 1937”, it was because of his greater fidelity to the truth of the discrete moment.

In its severity of belief, “Spain 1937” exemplifies the contraction of focus that can ally the political project to the lyric. They share a coeval nature, each being born

³⁰⁶ Prompted by the anger the lyric generated, Auden lost all faith in it; John Fuller (*W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 286-287) relates Auden’s attempts at softening the concluding stanzas in 1940, changing “deliberate increase in the chances of death” to “the inevitable increase...”, and “necessary murder” to “the fact of murder”. By 1966 Auden had disowned the poem altogether.

³⁰⁷ Stephen Burt’s reservations are the most recent in a long line of critical responses which cannot countenance the ideas “Spain 1937” seems to offer; I will refer to his arguments in my reading of “September 1, 1939” as there they apply with greater force. Anthony Hecht (*The Hidden Law*, 128) feels “Spain 1937” is simply unbelievable: “It is the sheer *unreality* of these details [those relating to “Tomorrow”] of a poem that so fiercely desires to insist upon reality that makes such passages completely unpersuasive.”

in the moment of attunement to the particulars (for the political read “obligations”) of one’s circumstance: the particulars of what the past has bequeathed, and what the present might consequently demand. We could even say that the two are more profoundly related, in another way: the political cause can be the attempt to preserve, in action, the kind of intensity of thought that the lyric continually recounts, in art. “Spain 1937” is the most commanding testimony to their possible interface, and to the logical result of following this interface through to its endpoint, which is a questionable divisiveness.

It opens with the familiar Audenic hawk’s vision, applied to the expanse of history rather than to a psycho-geographical landscape: “Yesterday all the past.” The gesture is knowingly provocative: can such a vision be applied to history, without some kind of ensuing violence of misrepresentation? Can the past be confined so sweepingly to “yesterday”? “Spain 1937” begins as a meditation on the accessibility of the particular within the past, but contrarily so, under the terms of an imaginative line in the sand of time, separating what has been from what is, and what will be. The speaker imagines instances of detail, across every human sphere of activity, each a constitutive aspect of “yesterday”:

Yesterday the assessment of insurance by cards,
The divination of water; yesterday the invention
Of cart-wheels and clocks, the taming of
Horses; yesterday the bustling world of the navigators.

If a unifying characteristic underlies these details, it is a broad one; they are processes, milieus, places. The onset of civilisation, included in the hawk’s vision of the temporal, is defined by these processes as the accumulation of practices and ways of being. The opening stanzas seem to cohere through the pressure between a monolithic past and a particular version of it. Almost in spite of the force of the imagery, the speaker makes no distinction among the different epochs: “yesterday” serves as an inventory of what does not apply “today”. Might this be a species of vanity – but an entirely necessary one - for the proponent of a cause? The poem describes an unavoidable impasse; the demands of the past and the present can never be reconciled, vanity for the present wins through. Yet the narrative of mystery that is being recounted (from “the abolition of fairies and giants” to the “chapel built in the forest”

and the “theological feuds”) could find its latest realisation in “the struggle” itself. What rituals might the modern political moment bring into being, in the place of “the trial of heretics” and “the carving of angels”?

Auden answers this suggestion tonally. The refrain “but to-day the struggle” has the telling solidity of catechism, especially when spoken aloud. Underscoring its sentiments, then, “Spain 1937” gives a concealed description of mystery’s rebirth for the twentieth century, in the altered shape of political belief, and belief-making. This mystery lies in the pursuit of clarity, the divining of the right way to proceed in the correct course of action. We are reminded of Auden’s famous sentences in the introduction to *The Poet’s Tongue*.³⁰⁸ The opening sequence of stanzas has condensed the past, such that it can be summarily put to one side; the value of origin itself (“the classic lecture / On the origin of Mankind” and “the belief in the absolute value of Greek”) can be suspended. In this concerted intellectual project we see the beginnings of the pursuit of clarity – the anxiety regarding my decisions and actions – that defines the experience of reading the poem, as well as the gravity of its themes. This is its manner of self-commentary, the way it truly lives and allows the reader to inhabit it and to share in its compression. The finality of the division between “yesterday” and “to-day” is not undermined by the suggestions of the rebirth of mystery. If we understand the poem’s quality of representation, extricating it from the matter of Auden’s sincerity or culpability as author, then it attests to the backdrop of the moment of political belief which, though it is predicated on an absolute sense of division between a now and a then, is inextricably connected to the events of the past. What the speaker is undertaking is the *imaginative labour* inherent to any form of sincere political life that can allow “to-day” to be subsumed by “the struggle”: the struggle necessarily turns away from the backdrop of the past. This is the nature of the political moment, which we are invited to share. “Spain 1937” is thus a dramatisation of the pursuit of clarity; clarity which may in fact be unattainable.

³⁰⁸ *The English Auden*, 329: “Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice”. I contend that the poem’s underlying meaning lies in its description of how the rational and moral choice is unalterably complex.

As the poem develops, Auden's speaker narrates instances of anxiety for clarity in the parabolic mode. Prior to April 1937 Auden had described himself as a "parabolic writer" (as distinguished from Isherwood's "realist" qualities).³⁰⁹ Here, recounting the words of the "poet", the "investigator", and the "poor", the speaker's parable represents a move toward specificity after the studied hawk's view of the opening. But parable has implications for the lyric's manner of perception, because parable seeks to preserve and cultivate the presence of the past in the lyric, not discard it. Again we see a constitutive tension, between the parabolic lyric mode and the content put forth by the poem as argument. In parable we are given emblematic figures whose relevance is transmitted across generations and across discrete circumstances: the evocation of today's struggle is necessarily backlit by the past.

The activity of each – poet, scientist, and the poor in their non-activity – defines their humanity, and yet, as John Fuller forcefully argues, they are united in being "restlessly incomplete".³¹⁰ The poet's "vision", the scientist's inquiries and the plea of the poor for "History the operator, the / Organiser, Time the refreshing river" to materialise, essentially seek to clarify the purpose of activity in light of the mystery that still darkens man's role in nature and in a potentially meaningful history. Were this clarity attained it would make "action more clear": it would explain action's demonstrable purpose, in and of itself, as well as in its consequences. This is another formative wish entertained by the political moment. "The life" answers this request for clarity obliquely:

And the life, if it answers at all, replies from the heart
 And the eyes and the lungs, from the shops and squares of
 the city:
 "O no, I am not the Mover;
 Not to-day, not to you. To you, I'm the

"Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily-duped:
 I am whatever you do; I am your vow to be
 Good, your humorous story;
 I am your business voice; I am your marriage.

³⁰⁹ Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 137.

³¹⁰ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 285.

This in itself is the reason why the “life” cannot be located, cannot be called upon to clarify. Life and history are the products of infinitesimal practices and activities: “I am whatever you do”. “Spain 1937” develops from an opening that prizes the isolation of the political moment (marginalizing the past, staking everything on the present), and builds upon its momentum to move toward a universal position. Parable allows the anxiety for clarity and for choice to be universalised, to be imagined as an exchange, a fantastical communication between the life (which must remain mute in reality), and the collective voice (which, correspondingly, can never find full unison of expression). Again, in parable, the imaginative labour of the political moment is exposed and, in the life’s final emphatic “yes, I am Spain”, it is rewarded. History had denied any overarching eschatology, but the voice of life has led the reader to appreciate the irreducible potential for significance posed by the present (in which the “just city” can be built). Spain is both symbol and actuality, and politics is the imaginative fusion of the two into one new electric reality, opening new ways of being and communicating.

The eventual naming of Spain in the heart of the poem represents the culmination of imaginative labour within the political moment, as if the specific locus of the conflict could be uttered only as its result. The first half of the lyric is preparatory in this sense; the structure as a whole realises and effectively does justice to the importance of what has been – to “yesterday” – in creating the conditions for the fusion of the symbolic and the actual. This fusion is attracting adherents to the cause, who “Have heard and migrated like gulls or the seeds of a flower”. Moving from hawk’s view, through parable, to more conventional narration here, Auden’s quatrains are structured to sustain these shifts in mode without any turbulence. The curtailed third line consistently slows the eye, ensuring an even pace throughout the poem which allows not only the balance of image and concept, but a sustained emphasis on each clause:

They clung like burrs to the long expresses that lurch
Through the unjust lands, through the night, through the alpine
tunnel;
They floated over the oceans;
They walked the passes: they came to present their lives.

Spain is the place of clarification, where the abiding schism between the inner life and the outer seems not to apply, the place where “Our fever’s menacing shapes are precise and alive”. It is the ground of a kind of secular benediction, a crucial note in the chord of the political moment. The trivia and ephemera of modern mass society have themselves been integrated into the moment of “choice” and “decision”, becoming coordinates that point toward the re-establishment of meaning, expressed in action. Stanzas omitted from *The English Auden* but included in the version of the poem in Robin Skelton’s seminal anthology *Poetry of the Thirties* best demonstrate this:

...For the fears which made us respond
To the medicine ad, and the brochure of winter cruises
Have become invading battalions;
And our faces, the institute-face, the chain-store, the ruin

Are projecting their greed as the firing squad and the bomb.
Madrid is the heart. Our moments of tenderness blossom
As the ambulance and the sandbag;
Our hours of friendship into a people’s army.³¹¹

The self-conscious grandiosity of these lines may deter some readers; indeed, at such moments the crux of the poem’s possibly reckless enthrallment is most apparent. The present is bestowed with a new kind of certainty, one where, for instance, the juxtaposition of “the firing squad and the bomb” with “moments of tenderness” that “blossom / As the ambulance...” does not jar. Even if the tone is overdone here, these stanzas contain the poem’s strongest emotional charge, along with the conclusion. They describe the fleeting moment where the present does not seem to depend on the outcome of the future for its validation. But it cannot last: the speaker turns inevitably toward that prospective outcome: “To-morrow, perhaps, the future.” The symmetry with the opening is hard to miss. The imaginative labour is now spent on envisioning the extension of the inner and the outer life: “the gradual exploring of all the / Octaves of radiation; / To-morrow the enlarging of consciousness by diet and breathing”. The return of the central refrain of struggle strengthens the sense of an exertion of faith, which, by now, at the poem’s end, is tested by the brute realities of the present. The Skelton version is the most provocative:

³¹¹ Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964; repr., London: Penguin, 2000), 135.

To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;
To-day the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.³¹²

It is interesting that the *ad hominem* charge laid against Auden by Orwell, which the poet heeded, was one of inauthenticity.³¹³ The lyric poem, in Auden's hands, no longer coheres solely around personal experience; rather it taps into the (non-subjective) collective imagination. Orwell's view, by extension, misunderstands this point. Orwell was right to detect a fundamental distance from the reality of taking life in the poem. If the poem was morally unambiguous, it would not be as revealing or as important. The aesthetic distancing – which we have observed, for example, in the placement of the specific issue of Spain fairly late on in the lyric – is absolutely crucial as it represents the habit of abstraction required in order to adhere to the political cause. The rights and wrongs of the matter are immaterial, artistically, but in a climate of assumed "responsibility", and with lives being lost, Auden could only invite severe criticism. What the hotly disputed stanza conveys, in its lexicon of cold calculation ("deliberate increase", "conscious acceptance", "necessary murder"), is that the clarity which could prove one's actions unassailable is finally a fiction, therefore it has to be contrived. "Murder" may indeed have to be regarded as a little more than a "word" – it may have to remain at the margins of experience, rather than at the centre – so that the cause can be pursued. This is the distance of the aesthetic of "Spain 1937", which crystallises the distance of the decision, and the tremendous cost of political action: a cost which does not exempt the protagonist from moral judgment. Such decisions isolate as they define us:

The stars are dead; the animals will not look:
We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and
History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.

"The animals will not look" suggests a familiar philosophical separation of man from nature; it also suggests, with "The stars are dead", the recognition that moral shame

³¹² Ibid., 136.

³¹³ Orwell wrote in an article for *The Adelphi*, later updated as *Inside the Whale*: "Mr Auden's brand of amorality is only possible if you are the type of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled." *Orwell in Spain*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Penguin, 2001), xvii.

may accompany this political moment. The lyric has already provided the context for the final maxim of the stanza. We have seen the necessarily double-handed movement of the speaker caught in the moment of political decision, in which the weight of the past pushes him to imaginatively discount it. The defeated are indeed lost and events cannot be reversed, but the political decision, the poem seems to tell us, is always cognisant of the past, even when it is shielded, even denied. The story of “Spain 1937” as a focal point of critical contention essentially brings the relationship between the lyric and the political moment full circle: in politics, one is called to account for one’s individual responsibility; in lyric art, no such binds exist, even in a lyric concerned with that very theme. Its primary purpose is to realise the conditions and nature of thinking, as they arise in the discrete event. That Auden accepted he had a case to answer with regard to “Spain 1937”, however, is a measure of the contiguity of the poetic with the political in the thirties.

“September 1, 1939”: September, 1939. *The English Auden*, 245-247.

The place of “September 1, 1939” in Anglo-American cultural consciousness is entirely assured. It remains Auden’s most frequently invoked and quoted work, though its critical stock seems to be inversely proportional to this renown. Auden himself disliked the poem from the moment of its publication, seeing dishonesty as its recurring motif.³¹⁴ Following the poet’s lead, Edward Mendelson is suspicious of its “rhetorical splendours”, pointing toward its “combination of grandeur and hollowness”.³¹⁵ More recently Stephen Burt, prompted by the poem’s renewed popularity after the Sept. 11 attacks, has argued that its failings hinge upon a figurative interpretation of the public sphere - and by extension, history - when greater objectivity about the possibility of practical change might have been more appropriate.³¹⁶ Burt’s position is worth quoting in more detail because it can spur us on to refining a different approach to the poem as lyric, from which we can salvage a

³¹⁴ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 325-326. In 1964 Auden recalled his immediate distaste for the piece: “The whole poem, I realised, was infected with an incurable dishonesty and must be scrapped”.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 330.

³¹⁶ Stephen Burt, “September 1, 1939 Revisited: Or, Poetry, Politics and the Idea of the Public”: *American Literary History* 15.3: Fall 2003, p 533-559.

sense of the discrete vision it preserved, and so explain the poem's shortcomings as argument on account of its singularity. Burt contends:

...: both poems ["September 1, 1939" and "Spain 1937"] encourage us to conflate figurative or emotional change with the practical changes required elsewhere in the world and to confuse our knowledge about the first with knowledge we may not have about the second.³¹⁷

Notwithstanding both poems' debatable purpose of "encouragement" (even the earlier poem, we have seen, exposes the process of its thinking in a wholly non-didactic way) we could respond by asking, what kind of function does such a reading intend for poetry? Is the truth that poetry claims simply a matter of argument, or does it claim another kind of ground for its truth? What would the purpose of criticism be if we prize the apparent veracity of ideas and argument above all else? Would it be corrective, where criticism plays the role of the handmaid, perennially on standby to sweep up after the unruly poet, whose flawed reasoning poses a dangerous influence? It is not my contention here that the role of argument in reading and engaging with the lyric is immaterial, or that it cannot contribute to an assessment of the value of the work. Argument is one of the constitutive aspects of reading lyric. But the rush to debate the lyric's sentiments, and, as is often the case with "September 1, 1939", to try to correct them according to the mores of the critic-as-arbiter (or the shamed poet himself), might obscure what the work also encapsulates. In fact "September 1, 1939" attests to the impossibility of extirpating the figurative from thinking about politics and history, which we must first attempt to explain before we become embroiled in questions of right and wrong. To restate my central critical approach: the value of lyric depends principally on its ability to preserve and make accessible the nature of thinking, whether or not the sentiments that accrue therein are laudable or intellectually defensible (and yes, the critic is charged with the task of determining this). A lyric can lose an argument, or can even contain a morally and intellectually untenable position, and still warrant the close interest of the reader for its power to reflect their own similarly unavoidable culpability: a point which the vocalicity of the form continually induces us to recognise. The truth of the lyric is the truth of all thought (the truism, almost): it is bound by time, place and circumstance. Criticism of the lyric has to be calibrated to appreciate this.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 544.

Auden's speaker might be forgiven for presuming a figurative public sphere in which his thoughts could be heard, a premise which causes Burt a good deal of anxiety. After all, events leading up to the utterance of the poem – the policy of appeasement by the British government before the invasion of Poland, the background of intellectual support for the far Right in Britain and Europe – had conclusively proved the abject failure of any pre-existing public sphere to safeguard its citizens against disaster. The moment of “September 1, 1939” could never be objective, or practically circumspect, in this sense. This absence is recounted in the first stanza:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:

The “clever hopes” encompass precisely the kind of misplaced optimism regarding an objective public sphere that has contributed to the situation in question. (The fantasy of total collective involvement visualised by Auden almost a decade before in “Consider this and in our time” is becoming reality.) The poem inhabits the vacuum of confidence that follows the “expiration” of such optimism, and in which the generation of a response is necessary. The public realm in twentieth century mass society is essentially the product of an imaginative excursion; this is the condition for its existing at all, and, concomitantly, for the speed with which it can appear to evaporate. It is useful to revisit the insight of Hannah Arendt, quoted earlier in Chapter Two, as she conjures the natures of the modern public realm in an especially relevant way here:

The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the

table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but would also be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.³¹⁸

“September 1, 1939” was written at the time of a global, world-historical vanishing of Arendt’s table. The first person, quasi-epistolary mode (“I sit in one of the dives”) represents the best point of relative security following the collapse of belief in the public realm, and the exposure of the fiction of a secure way of being-with. The effect is not simply to isolate, but to reinforce the reality of individual lives co-implicated in the expiration: “Waves of anger and fear / Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth, / Obsessing our private lives.” This is the sense in which the poem can be called political. In mass society, politics is shown to denote the negotiation between the private and the social: it is not merely one aspect of the latter. The advent of totalitarianism signalled this, the invasive truth, about modern collective life. “September 1, 1939” is spoken from within a transitional void; its “rhetorical” flourishes are an index of what has been lost or is being destroyed: a mark of sheer desperation.

As the speaker elaborates, he muses upon the inability of the past to offer any effective guidance, given the labile nature of the modern public realm. I read in the colon between “A psychopathic god: / I and the public know” a riposte to the earlier “Accurate scholarship” that “can / Unearth the whole offence”. The question is asked, what is the value of historical example? What possible force could it pose, when the structure of society denies it any stable ground? The centuries-old confidence of Western intellectual thought, that history could be the basis on which humanity makes rational, informed changes to its existence, is mournfully put to rest by the speaker, who recognises that the past can only have weight and presence in a tangible public sphere. A different, simpler form of knowledge is pursued, the knowledge contained in the axiom (“Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return”). “Exiled Thucydides knew”, and “Analysed”, but there is only the repetition of habit as the final basis of history: “The habit-forming pain, / Mismanagement and grief: / We must suffer them all again.” Now the rhetorical feel of the lyric reveals its source. The apothegms and axioms that gather across the lyric are a response to the intangible “Waves of anger and fear”; their cumulative effect is undoubtedly to leaden the verses, though the

³¹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52-53.

impulse behind them is clear. Where relations between individuals are transient – or, being at once intimate and distanced, opaque – the speaker seeks the permanence contained in the maxim. The problem of “September 1, 1939” is located in this drive to resurrect a public voice when, manifestly, events are immolating the historical confidence which would endorse it (“Who can release them now, / Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?”). The apothegm is the currency of the public realm, yet the speaker retains a suspicion of the general statement, and of the “conventions” of collective life, even in the “neutral” America:

All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

This confusion cannot be resolved in the scheme of the lyric else it would attest to a wider, artistically fatal dishonesty: the dishonesty of the artwork as an idealised representation of an experience, rather than a crystallised account of experience. The speaker can at least recognise that the lack of a clearly defined functioning public realm infects the personal “wish” also: “The windiest militant trash / Important Persons shout / Is not so crude as our wish: / ...Not universal love / But to be loved alone.” The forms and modes of the realm remain fresh on the speaker’s tongue; its content, however, is in the process of altering. Joseph Brodsky remarks upon this from another angle when he writes that “depiction of a world becomes, in its own turn, a world.”³¹⁹ This lyric describes a vacuum, and whatever regeneration that can be envisioned must lie in the voice itself:

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:

³¹⁹ Joseph Brodsky, “On “September 1, 1939” by W. H. Auden”, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 1986), 350.

The voice can address the habit of our “crude wish” for selfish love; it can attack the diluted form of collectivity that we might benightedly worship (“There is no such thing as the State”); it can redress our apparent isolation and self-interest (“And no one exists alone”). The blankness of these assertions reads ponderously in trimeter, which, conversely, calls attention to their lack of music. The maxim (plus its cousin the ultimatum, as in “We must love one another or die”) is unsuited to lyrical rendering, yet the truth of the utterance – its testimony to the recognition of the fragility of the public realm – is secure. The final stanza recovers some of the lyric’s poise in swapping the maxim for the symbol. Indeed, the symbol might be of untold worth and value now to a makeshift community of “the Just”, even though their light may merely seem “ironic” among the circulating waves of anger and fear. The speaker imagines the self purified into symbol:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

For all its awkwardness “September 1, 1939” is anyway partially redeemed in terms of argument by this final insistence on the potential of the individual to embody symbolic hope and opposition to the encroaching waves. Its frequent lapses into rhetoric are symptoms of the accuracy of its historical anxiety. The public sphere in which the concept of rhetoric in its original sense could arise – that is, rhetoric as the art of persuasion in the place of physical violence, in a realm guaranteed by the interlocution of its citizens – is being mourned here. Consequently the poem gestures toward a new kind of political economy for the age of mass society among those who are powerless to alter immediate circumstances, where some sense of witness has to substitute for one’s lack of agency. If we read “September 1, 1939” for the blueprints of a program, then it is certain to be deemed a failure. If, on the other hand, we attune ourselves to the moment of its utterance, and to the truth of its account as experience rather than as argument alone, then its place among Auden’s most celebrated works is justified.

The effect of grouping the lyrics examined in this chapter together is to redress the notion that political poetry is invariably trapped within its history and moment. All of the works provide material for our historical curiosity, but their status as modern lyrics prevents their ossification into mere curios. What the political aspects of Auden's work reveal most palpably is the centrality of the voice to the form, and its uses as a critical device when we ourselves are prompted to speak. That is to say, the lyric's manner of instating our proximity to the experiences encapsulated therein, while at the same time ensuring that the particularity of those experiences is upheld, becomes a working demonstration of political life in the age of mass society. The individual and collective experiences of communal life compete as aspects of an all-pervasive whole, and the lyric form seems ideally positioned to convey this continual exchange, this conditioning interdependence.

The qualitative separation of politics and poetry is by now a commonplace, but the experience of reading works such as "Get there if you can" and "Spain 1937" reminds us that they share a significant contiguity in their respective dependency on, and representations of, the temporality and the discreteness of thought. To think politics is to ask "who am I with", and the modern lyric form is shot through with this question. To write a poem such as "Spain 1937" or "September 1, 1939" is indeed to make a concrete intervention in public discussion, such that artistic criteria are (rightly) elided with moral ones. But those poems transcend the period and its controversies because of their fidelity to the ground of thinking: they testify to the conditions for thinking at a given juncture. That is to say, in their aesthetic and its elicitation of our own speech, they preserve the reality of their moment and so furnish us with a diachronic sense of history in which the particularity of the poem's experience and the particularity of our own come into fleeting contact. The qualitative difference between politics and poetry is maintained throughout, and Auden would recurrently insist on this difference in his later career; but perhaps the point needed to be repeated so often precisely because of their essential contiguity, which his early poetry had profoundly recognised and continues to make available to the speaking reader. In the following chapter I will pursue my analysis of the nature of the lyric moment by considering what the role of song might be for our increased understanding of the form.

Chapter Six: Lyric as Song

I – The Experiential Role of Song in Lyric

Having established new contexts for Auden's light verse, and having broached an expanded sense of how we might view the political in his work, a further phase of this project of redefinition is now needed, one that attempts to rework another conventional touchstone of lyric. This chapter will examine the nature of Auden's song, proceeding from the insistence on the element of voice that has guided my approach to Auden thus far. The proper understanding of Auden's qualities as a lyric poet can be best explicated here, where we consider the ways in which his poetry of the mid to late thirties can be described as songs. There has long been a place for the importance of song in Auden criticism, but I will submit a revised account of this importance. Monroe K. Spears takes a cautious view, calling songs only those works with a clear generic debt to musical forms or those which demonstrably imply a musical setting.³²⁰ Anthony Hecht seems to follow such an approach and his configuration is salutary, primarily because he sees Auden's interest in song as proceeding from the adumbrating division of his works into "public" and "private":

The language of the poem ["It's no use raising a shout"] involves none of the elliptical tricks, grammatical ambiguities, short circuits of syntax that so mark the "private" poems. "Public" in this accessible sense are most of the poems, early and late, that express a formal indebtedness to conventions of song or to poetic ancestors.³²¹

I contend that if we see song in Auden's work principally as the barometer of "publicness" then we obscure the nature of our interaction with many of the lyrics, which can be said to invoke a notion of song in the interplay between poem and reader, without always gesturing towards or relying upon this notion thematically. The dynamics of reading I have already described using the terms monody and chorus will continue to form a framework for my approach here.

³²⁰ Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island*, 106-107.

³²¹ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 19.

Again, the question is one of understanding the difference between the experience of the lyric and the orthodox critical view where we discuss or reconstruct its content. Ultimately, as before, it is necessary to relate how these facets are mutually productive in the moment of reading. Throughout my close readings in previous chapters I have implicitly suggested that the structure of song is hard-wired into our experience of reading Auden, whether through a monodic or a choral basis. In the close readings I will undertake here the full significance of this can be apprehended, and so it is useful to restate a number of our previous conclusions regarding both light and political lyrics beforehand.

Spears and Hecht are undoubtedly correct in drawing attention to the affinities shared by song and light verse. We recall that the first category in Auden's classification of light verse in the Oxford Book was "Poetry written for performance, to be spoken or sung before an audience."³²² Such a description clearly applies to those examples of Auden's own work which found their way into his editions of poetry after their first appearances in plays, or those apparently written with a singer or singers in mind and set to music by Benjamin Britten (the most obvious examples being collected as the "Four Cabaret Songs for Miss Hedli Anderson" included in *Another Time*³²³ - "O the valley in the summer where I and my John"; "Some say that Love's a little boy"; "Driver, drive faster and make a good run"; and "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone" which originally appeared in *The Ascent of F6*).³²⁴ This suggestion of performance is axiomatic in Auden's light verse; it is less so, but still vitally important in other mid to late thirties lyrics, including some of his most famous pieces. In such examples as "Look, stranger, on this island now," "Lay your sleeping head my love" and "Orpheus", the vocal force of the lyric is once again monodic, that is, the poems themselves are appraisals of the conditions for thinking and communicating in twentieth century modernity; and our response to them conjures the sense of distanced proximity that objectifies the historical truth of being-with. Again, the emphasis is on the nature of our experience of the poem rather than (the taxonomical) formal or generic characteristics. The poems described in this chapter have as their essential vocal quality an exploratory singing, in which the motif of

³²² Auden, *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, ix.

³²³ Auden, *Another Time*, 88-91.

³²⁴ Auden and Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6 and On The Frontier* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 92.

music - or the notion of expressive immediacy attributed to it - is paramount. It is with these poems, then, that Auden synthesises vocality and theme most comprehensively: in “Orpheus” for example, the implied singing voice of lyric looks upon music and musical rapture as a symbol for the kind communicative potential that the lyric form recognises as its cousin. As such the sense of distanced proximity characterising so much of Auden’s work is especially acute here.

Were we to speculate upon a number of biographical equations when considering the increased importance of music to his work in this period, we might discuss Auden’s involvement with Rupert Doone’s Group Theatre throughout the mid thirties, as well as his brief position working for the GPO Film Unit. *The Dance of Death* was first staged in February 1934, and by 1935 Auden and Isherwood were at work on *The Dog Beneath The Skin*. In the autumn of that year Auden worked under documentary maker John Grierson at the GPO until early 1936 (where poems such as “Night Mail” and “O lurcher-loving collier” were created in a similarly collaborative sense).³²⁵ It would not be incautious to argue that such challenges contributed to a redirection of the role of performance in Auden’s poetry: a redirection that modified his conception of lyric’s roots in musical forms. But the only viable proof of such a deduction – and the true fulcrum of its value - lies in close readings where we can observe with greater precision how the notion of performance, as the convergence between lyric and reader, is operating. These poems are indeed “written for performance”, but not in the purely literal sense Auden means in the Oxford Book. Performance might describe what happens when we read, where the experience recounted by the speaker reaches outwards and situates us as its reader-audience. Auden’s interest in music attested by lyrics such as “Orpheus” and “Lay your sleeping head, my love” is thematic, then, but at the same time it exposes the underlying currents of connectivity between poem and reader, bringing to light the imaginative framework that supports the lyric form.

This chapter includes lyrics which we might equally deem light, meditative, or discursive. “Look, stranger, on this island now”, for instance, might not strike us as a musical lyric in any other sense than the prosodic, but I will explain that the

³²⁵ Davenport-Hines, *Auden*, 139-146.

interaction between voice and reader has a distinctively intimate quality, such that “song” seems the most useful metaphorical term to describe how the poem generates meaning. The quality of interaction in each instance is very different, because each lyric invokes music in a different manner. It is their respective debt to song variously understood – the way that each presences a reader-audience in the manner of a musical performance, or else discusses directly the paradigmatic value of music in contradistinction to literature – that leads me to group these works together.

As is clear when we look at the genesis of those aforementioned works from *Another Time*, the distance between the stage and the experience of reading light verse is short. Auden’s light verse shows a recurring affinity with choral poetry in the sense that it presupposes an unobstructed channel of communication between poem and reader; and so the nature of our experience of reading is in a sense imitative and communal. In some of the poems I will discuss here this plural type of performance is recalibrated into the singular, making the lyrics monodic. The shift is not absolute: I use the terms simply to indicate the altering dynamic of how we read. More specifically, as we see clearly in “Lay your sleeping head”, Auden’s speakers describe the intertwining of the personal fate with the collective in a literal way, according to the direction of history. If the personal fate could never be articulated without reference to the general (as we saw in “Control of the Passes”, “Since you are going to begin today”, “Consider this and in our time” and others), now it must be made clear and explicit. What distinguishes the mid to late thirties examples is their interest in the crucible of privacy, alongside their musical aspects. Therefore, *pace* Hecht, “Orpheus”, “Lay your sleeping head” and “Look, stranger” are private songs. Their negotiation of this privacy produces what might seem at first glance a paradoxical impulse: to project their meaning outwards. Such a dichotomy is of course constitutive of lyric as we conventionally understand it. But Auden’s monodic lyrics appreciate this dichotomy for historical reasons. In fact, the poems in this chapter afford a fuller definition of what twentieth century monody might be, that is, a lyric mode attuned to the historical within the private experience, implicitly or explicitly.

The experiential role of song in lyric prevents us from describing the musical qualities of the form in predominantly architectural terms, as if the lyric began and ended on the page, or even more nebulously, in the poet’s mind. As I have argued

previously, it is within the voice which arranges the musical architecture that the true musicality of these poems resides, because it is the voice which is felt as so proximate *when we speak it*. These poems are metaphorical songs, on account of this proximity (musical performance, with its suggestion of closeness and mutuality, being an apt marker for proximity). Their metaphorical quality seems to be deeply, often complexly self-aware, because as linguistic page-bound artworks these poems exist at a necessary (textual) remove from their audience. The difference between the generic and modal uses of the term lyric should be restated here. We can say, from a generic perspective, that non-typographical lyric poems are implied songs, in the sense that we as readers are induced to speak them; in doing so we revive the verbal music that they contain, conjuring the experience of the original speakers themselves in the process. This interaction is the moment of heightened critical awareness rather than the occasion for a spurious, unreflecting affectivity. I have argued that the chain of speech (the implied voice of the lyric - the speaking reader) can be called the crux of lyric's objectivity: the installation of a version of being-with. The musical aspects of the poems examined here offer further encouragement to appreciate this will to communicate and the way that it is compromised, or better, elaborated in the form of a linguistic encounter. Auden's poem of 1938 "The Composer" is included here as a counterpoint as it imagines the relative purity of the musical experience as opposed to the literary. But for other works, the linguistic element is the key to their historical urgency because, in the negotiation of meaning which we undertake as speaking readers, we install and objectify the distance between one experience and another, even as we redeem it, along Arendtian lines, as communication between radically different experiences. Poetry, when spoken, becomes a surrogate for the kind of speech that Arendt called the basis of public life: it is fundamentally against the putative sameness of every subject. This is the quality of its "tiny contribution" in the late thirties, and the source of its lasting value. Music becomes a motif for coexistence, for the proximity of one's involvement with others, but in the process of reading them, these lyrics crystallise the truth and necessity of our distance from one another.

Considering the "contribution" of lyric, then, and recalling my discussion about lyric's interiority in Chapter One, I find it necessary to resist the equation of lyric's musical qualities with a movement of introversion or a turn away from

ordinary experience. Daniel Albright takes the Shelleyan view in his understanding of music in lyric. He quotes Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" approvingly:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody.³²⁶

Albright's own account of music in lyric becomes excessively lyrical itself in consequence, and invokes a Romantic notion of inspiration that is less useful to us in this context, with its gesture towards Keats's "unheard melodies":

The poet is the ghost within the lyre. Music and mind are neither strictly outside the poet nor strictly inside him, but instead come into being through a complex homeostasis, an interadjusting of the poet and the sensations that stimulate him, the ideal forms he intuitively within him. Thinking and harmonizing are almost synonyms, for the sensibility of the poet keeps modifying, modulating what it feels and knows toward ever greater clarity, proportion, consonance... In this way the lyrical mode abandons dealing with actual sounds in favour of unheard melodies, the operations of the mind, grows self-involved, self-admiring. This is not speech intended to be sung but the speech of Song itself...³²⁷

Albright quotes Auden's elegy to Ernst Toller (1939), "We are lived by powers we pretend to understand", and enlists his poem dedicated to Britten, "Anthem for St. Cecilia's Day", in support of this view. But the monodic songs I will examine presently certainly do not suggest that musical-inspirational vision can be appealed to as a retreat from historical reality, or as a solipsistic escape. Albright's description is entirely poet-centric. The quote from the Toller elegy (which I will examine closely in the next, concluding chapter) does not sanction a version of Auden's poetry as thus enthralled. Instead, lyrics such as "Lay your sleeping head" are sustained attempts to understand those "powers" and implicate the reader in the process of understanding through the monodic framework. The solo voice draws us closer to its experience as it refines our own, through the traces of musicality that we ourselves bring forth when we read the poem aloud. On these grounds I also depart from Susan Stewart's "soundless" notion of lyric:

³²⁶ Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*, 244.

³²⁷ Ibid.

But lyric is not music – it bears a history of a relation to music – and, as a practice of writing, it has no sound; that is, unless we are listening to a spontaneous composition of lyric, we are always *recalling* sound with only some regard to an originating auditory experience.³²⁸

Stewart's reception-oriented, inter-subjective thesis of lyric should be augmented, in my view, by the stronger recognition of the element of speaking patterned into the materiality of lyric language, as an inducement to the reader. Lyric of course qualifies as a "practice of writing" but it is closer in some respects to theatrical language, because it everywhere assumes the actual presence of a speaking voice, extending as far as the implication *that it will be spoken*, by us, rather than *it was spoken*, by the poet. This implication is never lost, unless, as we saw in example of William Carlos Williams given in Chapter One, the page-bound textual life of the form is harnessed according to its own self-sufficient resources. The sound that we create if we speak the lyric does not hark back to an "originating auditory experience": it is instead a form of distanced interlocution which brings to presence another's (historical, subjective) experience alongside one's own, allowing the two to cross-pollinate. "Spontaneity" does not exist for the reader of lyric as a retrospective imagining of the moment of composition; instead it arises from simply reading the lyric aloud, and so voicing another's experience with no prior knowledge or indication of what is to be uttered; William Waters's emphasis on lyric's apparent freedom from immediate context is important in this regard.³²⁹ This is why, throughout this thesis, I have described theme and voice as separable, to a degree. Voice can be said to be anterior to theme, because in the moment of reading lyric aloud it is vocality that strikes us, before the presentation of themes and subjects with which we engage. Rather than being symptomatic of false immediacy or an affective fallacy, the anterior voice brings forth our critical response even as we try to negotiate the absence of a clear context for the material we read: indeed, this negotiation is central to the experience of lyric. So, as we will see in "Orpheus", a poem about musical enchantment and the limits of inter-subjectivity, our speaking the sonorous lines is a form of metonymy, evoking at a necessary remove the enchanting music which Auden's speaker hears. Song, then, further describes this mutuality between speaker and reader, and it depends on sound.

³²⁸ Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 68.

³²⁹ Waters, *Poetry's Touch*, 5.

There is a sense in which this evolution in Auden's work is bridged by a species of light verse more appreciably interested in its vestiges in actual, not metaphorical song (in line with Spears's and Hecht's theses), and which signals an impending alteration in the standing of song, performance and musicality to Auden. One such example would be "O who can ever gaze his fill", composed in Iceland and included in *Letters from Iceland*.³³⁰ Before the publication of that volume, the lyric was given the rudimentary, but no less fitting title "Song".³³¹ Its darker subject-matter notwithstanding, it would serve as an adroit example of Auden's light verse, but it is more valuable as an introductory reading here. Underscoring the simplicity of that first title, the lyric can be said to introduce the notion of song as a trope in Auden's mature work, and to prepare the ground for our understanding of the experiential structure of lyric. It is composed of call-and-response verses (or, better, proposition and rejoinder) between various human actors and the voice of Death. The human voices are those of praise, celebration, and satisfying involvement in human affairs. They are emblems of one's immersion in experience, or of one's fulfilling involvement in culture in the broadest sense, including locality and the land, camaraderie and friendship, love and the erotic, spirituality and the belief in renewal:

"O who can ever gaze his fill",
 Farmer and fisherman say,
 "On native shore and local hill,
 Grudge aching limb or callus on the hand?
 Fathers, grandfathers stood upon this land,
 And here the pilgrims from our loins shall stand."
The English Auden, 205.

The responding voice of Death is the marker for finitude and transience. Hence we have two intertwined modes of song comprising the lyric, two antagonistic senses that serve to define the meaning of song in Auden's work of this period: song is both the most felicitous expression for our sense of being-with, and the form in which we recognise the inexorable terminus of this sense, as implacable as death itself. (If we impute to the lyric the metaphorical quality of song, then its termination and its

³³⁰ Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*, 223.

³³¹ The lyric appeared as "Song" in *New Statesman*, 16 January 1937. Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 213.

brevity strike us all the more intensely from this deathly perspective.) The second stanza makes this death-within-life explicit, “malice and circumstance” being the agents and harbingers of death (206):

“O life’s too short for friends who share”,
Travellers think in their hearts,
“The city’s common bed, the air,
The mountain bivouac and the bathing beach,
Where incidents draw every day from each
Memorable gesture and witty speech.”
So travellers think in their hearts,
Til malice or circumstance parts
Them from their constant humour:
And slyly Death’s coercive rumour
In the silence starts:

“O who can ever fill his gaze” ushers in the tension between our immersion in experiences of comparative security and our retreat from them. Other lyrics will implicate the reader more directly and more intricately in this back-and-forth motion, and will present the experience of immersions in another order (the artistic in “Orpheus”; the erotic in “Lay your sleeping head”).

This is why broad characterisations such as Albright’s have only a tenuous relationship to Auden’s work. The aspect of withdrawal into sonority, which Albright is right to call a lyrical feature generally, appears differently when we look at the detail of Auden’s poetry. It is employed according to a historically specific context, where the particular, private moment is cherished for its sanctity, but is ineluctably related to the general drift of historical circumstances. In this sense, Auden’s own, later description of the tension between these contrary but complimentary poetic tendencies, of (musical) immersion and (factual) circumspection, embodied by the figures of Ariel and Prospero, has already been exemplified in his thirties work.³³² The lyric moment of “Lay your sleeping head”, for example, sustains both. “O who can ever gaze his fill” first sketches this abiding tension, and does so with choral

³³² Auden, “Robert Frost”, *The Dyer’s Hand* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 337-338. “Art arises out of our desire for both beauty and truth and our knowledge that the two are not identical. One might say that every poem shows some sign of a rivalry between Ariel and Prospero; in every good poem their relation is more or less happy, but it is never without its tensions. The Grecian Urn states Ariel’s position; Prospero’s has been equally succinctly stated by Dr. Johnson: *The only end of writing is to enable the reader better to enjoy life or better to endure it.*”

transparency: we are reader-spectators, unproblematically taking on board the warning that the lyric offers.³³³ The celebratory voices are swiftly answered in turn by Death with his refrain “*Not to be born is the best for man*” and his imperative to “*dance while you can*”, a structure which seems to privilege Death with the final word. But it is in the condensation of the moments of wonder and joy and the solemn interjections from Death that the stanza achieves its real purpose, conveying concretely in form the polyphonous quality that typifies the experiential sense achieved between the implied singer of the lyric and the speaking reader. “O who can ever gaze his fill” is a signpost to these other works, stemming quite plainly from Auden’s interest in light verse and suggesting the deeper use to which he was to put the lyric’s musical inheritance, as a structure of reception.

In discussion of “Spain 1937” I have already posited the immersion–circumspection dyad, in the supra-artistic context of the political moment of belief in a cause. Whatever the thematic nature of the expression, the monodic voice – an outward-facing, solo voice – presents the means by which we as readers are emplaced as an audience, implicated in the truth and the insight of the lyric moment. Our speaking the lyrics is a central part of negotiating their meaning, hinging upon the spontaneity of uttering another’s experience. In the time of utterance we feel, often more acutely than in silent readings, the contrary processes that define the lyric experience; we are (and I emphasise the present tense) circling the experience of another as we are tempering, exaggerating or modifying it. Where choral poems had encouraged the adoptive, imitative dynamic in the speaking reader, a monodic lyric such as “Look, stranger” poses a heightened awareness of the time of thinking. Lyric has a long association with atemporality,³³⁴ but predominantly theorised from the perspective of the poet; it is also necessary to describe how the reader experiences lyric time. With reference to Auden’s love poetry I noted the speakers’ attempts to

³³³ John Fuller characterises this note as “how the pastoral, social, erotic or spiritual utopias are all irrevocably bonded to their negative motivations or conditions:” (*W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 213). I agree with the notion of the bond, which is instated in the lyric’s form, but I would depart from this reading: the different spheres of life here are not presented as utopias, but as spheres in which a viable, but transitory fulfilment is actually offered. They are meaningful *because* they “hasten man’s awareness of his own mortality” (Fuller, *ibid*), hence Death’s command to “dance”: to embrace the solace that nature, friendship, love or spirituality might make available.

³³⁴ Emily Dickinson’s poetics are said to be a sustained attempt to overcome the temporal by Sharon Cameron in *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979). Dickinson’s term for the experience of suspended chronology is “immortality:” “Some - Work for Immortality - / The chieffer part, for Time” (P 406).

take refuge from brute chronological inevitability. In a textual sense (discounting for a moment the role of our reception), time is momentarily suspended. Albright summarises this lyric trope:

In this species of lyric, [Albright quotes Pound's "Erat hora"] the poem attempts to construct an exceedingly intense and defective world in which space has thinned itself into a single dazzling photograph and all the numerals have been scrubbed off the clock face except one marker denoting the important moment. This moment is what Wordsworth called the spot of time, Joyce the epiphany, Eliot the moment in and out of time.³³⁵

But aside from the textual sense, there is the receptive sense to consider, with speaking as its key. "Lay your sleeping head" and "Orpheus" are notable for the way that they record not only the attempted escape from time, but a sharper appreciation of its experience. In speaking lyrics such as these, in the process of uttering and making sense, we become most aware of the unfolding temporality of thinking. The chronology of these lyrics, then, is enabling. The effect, for the speaking-reader, is liberating rather than prohibitive, because the experience is one of spontaneous colloquy: it is truly inter-subjective. The experience of lyric is always time-bound, but as speaking it need not be mired in an understanding of chronology as implacable, as essentially external to the inner life. Speaking lyric instead makes us aware of an internal chronology, one that arises through communication with others.

In the close readings of this chapter, the dyad of immersion-reflection that characterised some of the political poems is revealed as the founding turn of all thinking. All Auden's lyrics attest to the sort of seepage of the public into the private sphere that Arendt theorises so acutely. Political lyric instanced merely one manifestation of it. What we are given in the moment of reading lyric is a symbolic kind of immersion in the primal scene of communication and colloquy with another. This is the true nature of the "reality effect" recounted in Chapter One. As Arendt writes, after the rise of society it is our notion of reality itself that is threatened:

³³⁵ Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*, 7.

The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves, and while the intimacy of a fully developed private life, such as had never been known before the rise of the modern age and the concomitant decline of the public realm, will always greatly intensify and enrich the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings, this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men.³³⁶

As a form of inter-subjective communication governed by the assumption and ratification of speech (at the poet's level and at ours respectively), Auden's lyric insists, through its very bases, on this reality. The voice of the lyric exists prior to our engagement with it, as a synecdoche for this reality: we activate and embody it as we bring our unique perspective to the poem, as we negotiate with and devise its meaning. "Look, stranger" and "Orpheus" remind us that reading aloud is the source of Auden's lyric singularity, because speaking is a way of preserving the intensity of the first encounter with the poem: we are continually aware of our changing thought processes in relation to this real voice. Lyric poetry proves that after the rise of society there can be a type of communication that transcends doxology, one in which the question "who am I with" can be asked, inexhaustibly. The poems selected here continue a line of Auden's work running parallel to the political selection previously examined: they testify to the (critically aware) spontaneity of our encounter with his work, in which mutual intelligibility and the capacity for surprise protect our interrelationship in the social.

II – Lyrics as Songs

"Look, stranger, on this island now": November 1935. *Collected Poems*, 130-131.

"Look, stranger" opens this sequence of lyric songs, and forms a representative example of how lyric achieves its manner of proximity. Of course, the poem cannot be deemed a song in the strictest sense. But therein lies its significance. I am using the term "song" to refer to the experiences that these poems describe and can actually instate in our understanding: experiences of closeness and mutual involvement that

³³⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

exceed the normal channels of verbal communication. Whether as a consequence of his theatrical work or not, the endorsement given by “Look, stranger” to lyric’s own pre-programmed means of drawing the recipient closer to the art is plainly apparent. In this sense, the song qualities that the lyric bears can be understood independently of its later incarnation as an actual song, set to music by Benjamin Britten.³³⁷ On the page alone other poems have a clearer sense of their footing in song, but “Look, stranger” uses a subtle musicality to vivify one of Auden’s most familiar poetic modes: the voice that openly directs our attention.

It begins,

Look, stranger, on this island now
 The leaping light for your delight discovers,
 Stand stable here
 And silent be,
 That through the channels of the ear
 May wander like a river
 The swaying sound of the sea.

Whereas previous lyrics such as “Sir, no man’s enemy” had drawn upon archaic syntactical structures to produce a singularly modern effect, now the arrangement of “Stand stable here / And silent be” seems less troubled by urgency, giving the opening a poise that complements its internal music (“The leaping light for your delight discovers”). This is a voice grounded in a less harried style of address; it comes to each of us (strangers) with a calmer solicitation. I would dispute John R. Boly’s citation of these lines as an example of Auden’s creation of a character “who keeps at a safe distance, doubts the authority he usurps and fears his audience”.³³⁸ Rather, the effect is of heightened proximity to another’s perspective. Nothing is revealed by the speaker personally, because *our* perception is the central issue here; understood as a type of impersonal singing the voice of “Look, stranger” can orient what we see and feel as neutrally as possible.³³⁹ What the voice reveals is the basic unit of our

³³⁷ The lyric was set by Britten in 1937 with the title “Seascape”, as part of “On this Island Op. 11”. *Benjamin Britten’s Poets: The Poetry he set to music*, ed. Boris Ford (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994), 50.

³³⁸ John R. Boly, “Auden and Modern Theory”, *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, 143.

³³⁹ I do not contend that “Look, stranger” is a watershed poem in this respect; the neutral voice in evidence here is of course counterbalanced by the wholly partisan voice of “Spain 1937”, for example. My argument is that the term “lyric” implies neither neutrality nor partiality as a rule. Rather, in a given instance such as “Look, stranger”, Auden found in the song trope a way of describing, through lyrical techniques, an intellectual and sensory symbiosis between poem and reader that circumvents the

perception: the power of our senses. The metrical construction of the sestina, instead of presenting what Boly calls “clipped rhythms”, gives us a hiatus at its centre (with its third and fourth lines comprising either four or five beats at most) in order to rise into the longer lines in which the full and leonine rhymes come to the fore, as if following a cycle of the “swaying sounds of the sea”, and “the pluck / And knock of the tide”. We are not called upon to act (“Get there if you can”) or to “Consider”, but simply to look and so to feel. This is evidently a retreat from the potentially restrictive dictum of poetic responsibility to form explicit cultural diagnoses.

This is not to say that “Look, stranger” has no bearing on those fraught questions of selfhood and societal life that had long exercised Auden. Its unquestioned guidance of our perspective seems innocuous, but that guidance resonates when we recall the hectoring vocative of earlier works. Similarly we recall the psycho-geography with which Auden made his name; the rotting wharves, the abandoned mining seams, the fortified farms, the borders and frontiers which had proscribed any agency and forbidden escape. Here we are alerted to the sensory richness inspired by the island itself and also to the view beyond its shores: the island delimits the freedom of perception, but intensifies our awareness of its powers. It is as though the sensory capacity has encouraged a form of passivity that is neither disengaged nor culpable:

Here at a small field’s ending pause
Where the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges
Oppose the pluck
And knock of the tide,
And the shingle scrambles after the suck-
-ing surf, and a gull lodges
A moment on its sheer side.

The voice directs but does not coerce, and barely introduces the features of human activity among the natural world; the “small field” is naturally bordered by the cliff-face, and we pause here, at the brink of the island. I identify this method of marshalling our perspective as rooted in song and performance: it is not crassly

demands of the “public life” in the thirties (one’s “point-of-view”, one’s allegiances, one beliefs). This is another example of the defining imperative of “lyric” in Auden’s hands: to emplace the reader in a discreet experience (as a poem such as “Spain 1937” will do in an entirely different context).

“public” (in that it clearly resists the coarse tactics of doxology present in journalism and political propaganda), and neither is it “private” (in that its type of intimacy does not seem to be defined in contradistinction to such public discourse). This is the resonance that Auden’s lyrics have at their experiential level, which signifies their exclusion or exile from the trials of the public-private compound of modern experience, even as they acquire their meaning in relationship to this paradigm. We are shown the natural balance between opposing forces (“its tall ledges / Oppose the pluck / And knock of the tide”): between the geological certainty of the tall ledges, and the dynamism (“leaping light”) and cyclical pressure of the tides. The broken participle “suck / -ing” not only evokes the image aurally, delaying the word to produce a dragging effect in mimicry of the scrambling shingle; it typifies the feel of the lyric at its heart, with its freedom from high-flown scrutiny or tyrannizing abstractions. We follow the gull’s sphere of vision as it rests on the cliff-face, and it is here that we see the integration of human activity afresh, and from a decisive distance:

Far off like floating seeds the ships
Diverge on urgent voluntary errands,
And this full view
Indeed may enter
And move in memory as now these clouds do,
That pass the harbour mirror
And all the summer through the water saunter.

“Look, stranger” directs us to this final panorama in order to qualify its opening characterisation of the reader (“Look, *stranger*, on this island now”), and it is here that the figurative precision of the “island” coheres. The movement that we are implored to undertake, from the land to the coast, is a corrective one, overturning the connotations of that first address. We are only strangers according to the terms of a self-created hermetic world. Within that island – whether it applies to the whole collective, to sub-groups of nationality and allegiance, or to the groupings of the personal life - is an underlying connection, which the lyric has encouraged in its insistence on our sensory liveliness, and our easy integration into the sequences of the

natural world.³⁴⁰ So from here we can appreciate the significance of ships as they “Diverge on urgent voluntary errands”; it is the word “voluntary” that is central (as it is, contrastingly, in the “involuntary powers” of the later “Lay your sleeping head”). The ships are emblems of the expression of human purpose, as they “diverge”. Whether we see the constancy of their “errands” or their differences – whether the urgency in question signifies a threat (as hinted by the repeated harsher consonants) as well as a shared sense of purpose – is something that the voice cannot determine. It is enough that “this full view” is retained and will “move in memory”, and that the synergy between thinking, experience, and the natural process remains accessible (“...as now these clouds do, / That pass the harbour mirror / And all the summer through the water saunter.”). Thus the voice that has directed our senses finally retreats. “Look, stranger” strikes an optimistic chord in this respect, finding a mode of didacticism that is never hortatory, and orchestrating its subtle marriage between the heightened senses and a dispassionate view of human affairs to guide us using the intimacy of an implied vocal address.

“Lay your sleeping head, my love”: January 1937. *The English Auden*, 207.

Auden’s later title for “Lay your sleeping head, my love”, “Lullaby”, announces its musical lineage in obvious terms. The lyric is deemed a key poem in Auden’s development from a number of perspectives. Justin Replogle contends that it testifies to Auden’s continued interest in empirical philosophy, explicable according to the triad of freedom-choice-necessity.³⁴¹ Edward Mendelson identifies the significance of the piece to love lyric tradition with the contentious argument that it is “the first English poem in which a lover proclaims, in moral terms and during a shared night of

³⁴⁰ I depart from Edward Mendelson here: his reading of the lyric is, once again, autobiographical, interpreting the titular island as a symbol of Auden’s own “poetic isolation” and the final stanza as a call for “the author to find his own urgent errand” rather than taking refuge in the senses (*Early Auden*, 339-340). For me, this reading seems to position the sensory capacity in opposition to the intellectual, which the lines “And this full view / Indeed may enter...” do not support. I submit that the lyric describes the confluence of sense and intellect, not their antagonism.

³⁴¹ Replogle, *Auden’s Poetry*, 48-49.

love, his own faithlessness”.³⁴² Anthony Hecht notices an interesting, less obvious musical bearing on the poem, remarking on the possible influence of Broadway writers on the poem’s sexual indeterminacy.³⁴³ Whilst I acknowledge each of these respective readings, my approach to the lyric departs in one fundamental respect: I believe it is more useful to retain a sense of its spoken performance as song. “Lay your sleeping head” takes the customary scene of erotic lyric, what Mendelson calls “the night of mutual satisfaction”,³⁴⁴ and employs a low throated, hushed address to become a song of the “human”, a meditation upon numerous provinces of human intimacy, including human action and its corollary, history, and the human fallibility that unites all these modes. This lyric speaks with private voice and with public, and again, in a sense evades both. The manner of such negotiation is once again the decisive proof of the poem’s powers.

This negotiation is introduced in the first stanza:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms til break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

The opening plea introduces the poem’s moral register, the “human” finding a fitting place of refuge on the speaker’s “faithless” arm. I read “faithless” as a description of the speaker’s culpability in the lovers’ context, as Mendelson suggests, but also as a synonym for the broader “human”. Faithlessness stems from this first essential concept of humanity, as the shared trochaic stress and arrangement of “human” and “faithless” would indicate. Right away the address to the beloved is defined in terms that look outwards: this is less an utterance of pure escape, more one of temporary

³⁴² Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 233.

³⁴³ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 104. Hecht also provides an exhaustive list of poem’s possible forebears, from Catullus to the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch.

³⁴⁴ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 233.

respite. The solipsism of the earlier love lyrics has been qualified in favour of a voice pitched between secrecy (the post-coital undertone suggesting bodily pleasure) and expansiveness (the self-conscious ruminations of “Time and fevers burn away...”, “and the grave / Proves the child ephemeral”). In this way our intrusion into this scene of intimacy is immediately sanctioned, and over the course of the stanza the speaker modifies the address, from the beloved to the unspecified general. This is how we can understand the conceptual footing of “Lay your sleeping head” in the experience of song, rather than as a poem which gestures loosely toward musical forms.

Approached as a discrete moment, the lyric binds the particular to the general. What the lovers feel and experience resonates directly in the outer world. Love and lovers are “Mortal” and “guilty”, and later in the poem it is hoped that “our mortal world”, with its laws of consequence, is adequate to sustain a life lived in security, both physical and moral. The sonorous stretches and resolutions, offered by long vowel sounds halted by the firmer anapaests (“grave / Proves the child ephemeral.”; “Mortal, guilty, but to me / The entirely beautiful”), convey a sense of this cyclical inevitability, within which intensities such as this form oases of reflection. We have seen the way in which the post-coital moment of the love lyric affords a particular kind of insight in Chapter Three. Here the voice is circumspect, perhaps reconciled to the finitude of its utterance:

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's sensual ecstasy.

I would follow Anthony Hecht here, and disagree with Mendelson's pessimistic reading of these lines. Mendelson interprets the absence of “bounds” between soul and body as proof that both are finally perishable, according to the principle of “Time

and fevers” and the ephemeral introduced previously.³⁴⁵ To Hecht the idea is less complex and the meaning more literal: “the power of love proves the falsity of the “dualistic heresy”: that there is in fact no distinction between soul and body, that they are similarly blessed, and completely at one with each other”.³⁴⁶ Qualifying this slightly, I read the stanza as the speaker’s self-description - of the way in which soul and body are mutually productive rather than indistinguishable. “Lay your sleeping head” is uttered, quite clearly, in the moments after an erotic encounter, where bodily sensation has given rise to cerebral meditation in which one’s innermost thoughts and feelings are openly expressed. We might call this an exposure of “soul”, or (if such a thing cannot be spoken), at least a verbal form of acknowledging it. The speaker considers that the reverse might also apply: “While an abstract insight wakes / Among the glaciers and the rocks / The hermit’s sensual ecstasy” (later altered by Auden to the more forceful “carnal ecstasy”). The lyric has made abstract concepts the chief vessels of its meaning: “human”, “faithless”, “Mortal”, “guilty”, and now “Soul and body”, later “Certainty, fidelity”. This basis once again testifies to the outward glance of the lyric, and implicitly suggests that moments such as these – the point of interaction exemplified here as the lovers’ scene – comprise the substance and origin of such ideas. So there is a dual synergy addressed here: between soul and body, and between personal experience and its corollary in the drift of history. The “Grave” vision sent by Venus reminds the lovers that “supernatural sympathy, / Universal love and hope” exist such as they are through the “human”, which is “faithless” and ultimately fallible. As song, “Lay your sleeping head” occupies a position between those poles of body and soul, personal and historical. The third stanza faces the approach of history head on:

Certainty, fidelity
 On the stroke of midnight pass
 Like vibrations of a bell,
 And fashionable madmen raise
 Their pedantic boring cry:
 Every farthing of the cost,
 All the dreaded cards foretell,
 Shall be paid, but from this night
 Not a whisper, not a thought,

³⁴⁵ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 232.

³⁴⁶ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 107.

Not a kiss nor look be lost.

The “human” is defined as consequentiality. If, as Replogle argues, “Lay your sleeping head” belongs in Auden’s Marxist phase (or empirical philosophy phase), then it is only very broadly so: through this equation between the practice of the private life (where “Certainty” and “fidelity” acquire their ultimate meaning) and its conditioning of the direction of history. As well as being actual living figures, the “fashionable madmen” seem to exist as symbols - as embodiments of the aggregate of follies which, at the time of writing, defined the conception of the public sphere. All are implicated in paying the price (“Every farthing of the cost”), but the lyric itself is a moment of preservation, opening a renewable emotional memory that, though subject to the passage of time, is a welcome form of stasis and surety (“Not a whisper, not a thought, / Not a kiss nor look be lost”). This is the core of the lyric, as song: it is a refuge from consequence which we are invited to share, but one that is understood as time-bound. Perhaps the innovation that Mendelson questionably ascribes to “Lay your sleeping head” regarding faithlessness might more accurately relate to this, its refutation of classic notions of eternity and timelessness that characterise love lyric.

For its climax, the lyric returns to its beginnings with a vocative address to the beloved, bringing the moment of utterance full circle;

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of sweetness show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,
Find our mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness see you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.

The most the speaker hopes for is a brief concordance between the beloved and his surroundings: the possible synergy of “a day of sweetness” for “Eye and knocking heart” might momentarily endorse the transit between the personal and the external that has given birth to the irresistible force of history, understood as both the product of and the condition for the personal life. Thus I take “the involuntary powers” to

refer not to Venus,³⁴⁷ but to nature and human circumstance combined, as opposed to the “voluntary errands” of “Look, stranger”, where the volition of those errands spoke of their humanity. The final wish of the speaker’s song recognises the dynamic between the personal and the historical, with its potential to destroy (“Nights of insult let you pass”), and calls for a redemption of the kind of visibility (examined in earlier works such as “Sir, no man’s enemy”) that characterises the self’s conception of its place in history, and which is specific to the twentieth century confusion of public and private realms.

In a sense the final lines describe the dangers of modern selfhood as well as the more palpable dangers of historical catastrophe. Awareness of this personal-historical dynamic might give rise to a self-watchfulness closer to an estranging paranoia, but the benevolent supervision of others such as the speaker (“Watched by every human love”) would guard against this danger. “Lay your sleeping head” is the sort of wish which acknowledges the fragility of its hope, but asks for an endorsement of its sentiments all the same, by insisting on one’s attunement to the contemporary historical reality. It is most appropriately understood as song because of the way in which it uses the moment of intimacy and private address to open this connection between poem and reader, hovering between personal and historical voicings. Of course, this defining paradox in love lyric pre-dates Auden’s work by centuries. But the synchrony of “Lay your sleeping head” with the pulse of the governing relationship between self and history in the twentieth century might be said to comprise Auden’s most salient and noteworthy innovation.

Orpheus: April 1937. *The English Auden*, 212-213.

As a poem about aesthetic possibilities, “Orpheus” perhaps presents the reader with a singular challenge in the context of Auden’s body of work. Our task is to understand how our response is emblematically close to the speaker’s experience (that is, where this closeness is an emblem of the nature of our interdependence, according to the

³⁴⁷ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 233.

terms of mass society), and yet crucially removed from it. This much is true of many of the works discussed previously. But “Orpheus” signals a shift in the nature of Auden’s difficulty as well as a development in his approach to the lyric as performance. An introverted poem, it can be called lyrical in the modal, generic, and experiential senses, and the range of these lyric qualities is at the same time the source of its complexity. The lyric comprises an attempt to communicate the intensity of perception that proceeds from Orpheus’s music, music which poses as a congenial metaphor for the possibilities of lyric art. So the central figurative conceit of the poem is buffeted by a strong discursive undercurrent that encourages us to look outward, beyond the confines of the aesthetic experience.

Two musical aspects of the poem comprise its interest. First, and most obviously in its formal arrangement, “Orpheus” possesses a sonorous ambience, a slight thinning of the air of the poem, pitched as a melodious speaking. Its long, searching clauses remain undisturbed by arcane vocabulary, and those elements that defined the early Audenesque, in grammar and tone, are absent here. The second, experiential aspect of the poem’s lyrical quality – the source of its new kind of difficulty - relates to its concatenation.

We are shown into “Orpheus” *in medias res*, in a style which recalls Eliot’s “Marina” in our instant captivity to the speaker’s dramatic self-positioning.³⁴⁸

What does the song hope for? And the moved hands
A little way from the birds, the shy, the delightful?
To be bewildered and happy,
Or most of all the knowledge of life?

This avoidance of clear context leaves the reader non-plussed, but necessarily so. Once again Auden’s speaker is endeavouring to represent for us an admixture of immersion and circumspection. This admixture takes a challenging shape, but it can be summarised like this: “Orpheus” is a meditation on the visual and the aural, a poem

³⁴⁸ Eliot’s poem opens “What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands / What water lapping the bow / And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog / What images return / O my daughter.” *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 103. The impressionistic mode and the curious style of concatenation are notably similar, though for Auden’s speaker the distance from his subject is less painful, placing the lyric in a different emotional register.

that itself pitches these senses in a subtle kind of opposition, ratified by our speaking the poem aloud. The figure of Orpheus himself - he of transcendent lyrical gifts, the doomed enchanter and the master of the lyre (the etymological source of “lyric”, of course) – is visualised by the speaker and we conjure him in our minds through the speaker’s perspective (“And the moved hands / A little way from the birds...”). The way that the reader is immediately transported into this perspective, without qualification or preamble, suggests a kind of rapture, as if the power of Orpheus’s song has gripped the speaker. But crucially the music itself is undescribed: rather it is implied, tantalisingly outside of the field of our imagination. We can visualise Orpheus, but we cannot conjure the Orphic music. As a result we become anxiously aware of the absence of this music: its absence underscores our speech. Much of the difficulty of the poem resides here, in the manner in which Auden’s speaker is torn between immersion in musical rapture and the contrary impulse to fix, to uncover and to explain, or in short, to face the reader: another instance of the by-now familiar movement of immersion and circumspection.

The lyrical music of the lines themselves record the speaker’s rapture, in a conventional mimetic way, but the curious series of questions which comprise the verse indicate that he is only notionally interested in communicating at the level of discussion. That both reflection and rapture are present in our thinking at their highest intensity as we speak, or, put differently, that we can balance an imaginative speculation of Orpheus’s song with an awareness of our distance from it, defines the lyric. We follow the speaker into his liminal position, between reaching out to communicate, and drawing back, to embrace the sensations that remain our and ours alone. So the difficulty here serves to prompt a complex kind of colloquy, and we can begin to see the way that the poem involves itself in a broader meditation on the nature of modern art. “What does the song hope for?” is directed not merely at the image of Orpheus but, we might argue, at the nature of the modern poetic project. The music that could bind Orpheus to his listeners survives in the poem in vestigial form, in its lyrical attributes. The poem as a whole becomes a qualified version of the primal scene of ancient poetry, performed as song, where we completely lose the distinction between poet and audience. We chase the echo of this music in our own recitation, but it remains beyond our imagining.

In this sense, we could say that “Orpheus” builds on a similar insight to Freudian and Marxist theories (the latter described by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*)³⁴⁹ about the original magical and cultic function of art, and thus plots neatly onto the work of Jay Bernstein, recounting the absence left at art’s core since the inauguration of aesthetics. But this would lead us away from the discreet insight that “Orpheus” can provide. Nothing is absent in the reader’s experience. Another song, the song of our recitation, is engendered as a counterbalance to the absent music of Orpheus. For the reader, the first stanza offers more than a mere substitute. It is the most lucid translation available of one mode of communication into another: the musical to the literary. At the same time, when we read we do not register the distinction between our capacity to visualise and our incapacity to hear, because this would deny the standpoint from which the poem truly connects. This is a modern lyric, which translates for us a unique experience of proximity to a different form of perception (the speaker’s), and retains the essential dimensions of that proximity. Nothing is lost in translation: on the contrary, this is how “Orpheus” generates meaning. Contrarily, although written to be spoken aloud (its even pace rising into a sense of emotional urgency at its finish: “O if winter really / Oppose....”), “Orpheus” might be as effective when read in silence, so as to better direct us to the space where the music of Orpheus plays, always too far from our hearing. But it is the real conjoining made possible in art that informs the bewilderment and happiness that the speaker considers as the song’s “hope”. The opposition of these feelings to “the knowledge of life” follows from the tacit understanding of the tension between the musical experience of Auden’s speaker and the linguistic one he needs must present to us, through the medium of poetic language. His enraptured bewilderment cannot be fully conveyed to us, language being better suited to the propagation of “knowledge” than the profound “happiness” experienced in music. The verse’s strange concatenation – its succession of three apparently unrelated questions - instates this enriching difficulty as we the readers speak it, giving us a glimpse of the poem’s significant intellectual dimensions before impelling us to move on.

“Orpheus” is soon over, its depth condensed across two stanzas which themselves have an unclear sense of continuity. This brevity is employed in the

³⁴⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 127. “Art is what remains after the loss of what was supposed to exercise a magical, and later a cultic, function.”

service of the difficulty already described. The traditional compression of the lyric form dovetails with the sense of timelessness that the moment of “Orpheus” demands, where the eye moves slowly across the clauses, with the termination of the poem always imminent, and weighs the procession of questions that finally resists a clarifying coda. The effect is a contrary one, as if the moment of reading exists in a vacuum, and this defines the magnetism of the poem: it is the means by which the speaker’s sensations and the reader’s approach one another. The second stanza begins with the only statements that the poem contains, before moving once more into its hushed interrogative:

But the beautiful are content with the sharp notes of the air;
The warmth is enough. O if winter really
Oppose, if the weak snowflake,
What will the wish, what will the dance do?

Orpheus’s “moved hands” (which, as I read the syntactical arrangement of the first stanza, are both “shy” and “delightful”) convey his timidity: his self-effacement in the most literal sense of the term. His “moved hands” are moved away from the focus of the speaker’s scrutiny, and conversely, this is why they are noticed first of all. The song is the instrument of Orpheus’s self-removal, hence it is the song and not the singer which preoccupies the speaker. Orpheus’s song is truly objective here; for the moment of its utterance it exists with greater urgency than its subjective source, as does the song of the speaker, which we as readers help to instate (Orpheus – speaker; speaker – reader).

“Orpheus” is wary of unsupportable claims for the aesthetic experience, however. The “But” which opens the second stanza recognises the peril of artistic communication, which is as follows: the contentment of the “beautiful” with “the sharp notes of the air” and “The warmth” means that they are denied an order of perception that would defeat their complacency. The Orphic song is hypnotic, but it is also a clarion call of sorts, at least to Auden’s speaker, who concludes with another sequence of questions rather than reassurances. What kind of complacency does it warn us of? Orpheus himself, with his modesty and dedication to his calling, is a corrective example: on the one hand there is the art which offers merely solace and contentment, and on the other there is the braver art, which is exposed to its own

extinction by “the winter”. “Wish” and “dance” refer to what the engaged recipients of the song – those who follow Orpheus – might derive from it: a new version of the self’s capabilities of expression, and a greatly amplified sense of how the particularity of one’s experience can approach another’s.

The qualifications on the powers of the aesthetic win through, however. The final, worried question – what will they “do” – seems to acknowledge the limits of the song, the wish and the dance.³⁵⁰ They cannot be called upon to “do” anything, in the sense of producing action: thus the lyric gestures towards Auden’s ongoing preoccupation with the vaunted application of art to the public life. The world that “Orpheus” conjures is fleeting and imperilled. But the lyric proves that while that world exists imaginatively, it is granted fleeting objectivity through the colloquy between Auden’s speaker and the reader. Auden allows the speaking reader to imagine and, at a series of removes, to partake in a different manner of perception. We might say that “Orpheus” is about how to read modern lyric, or at least, how to read Auden’s: as a poetics with the capability to usher us into closer proximity with the speaker’s manner of seeing, hearing and feeling, through which the page seems to defy its own silence.

The Composer - December 1938. *The English Auden*, 239.

“The Composer”, Auden’s tribute to his close friend and collaborator Benjamin Britten, is cousin to “Orpheus”. As one of Auden’s experiments with the sonnet in the public mode during late 1938 and early 1939, this poem takes leave of its predecessor’s introversion. We cannot call it monodic because, in a manner akin to our reading of light verse, it circumvents the problems of address to involve us unproblematically, inviting us to consider its sentiments above all else (as do the other sonnets written in Brussels, “Rimbaud”, “A. E. Housman”, and “The Novelist”). To

³⁵⁰ This accords with Mendelson’s view of the poem to a degree; as he describes it, “Orpheus” is Auden’s “rebutal to his art” (*Early Auden*, 345). But I think the element of biography in Mendelson’s reading, which sees “Orpheus” as Auden’s meditation on the final value of his own powers to enchant, risks hypostatizing the poem in a way that sacrifices the intensity with which it describes our renewable encounter with this new kind of difficulty. In short, I lean towards the reader in my interpretation, Mendelson (with great insight) towards Auden himself.

give the poem new significance, it is necessary to loosen my insistence on the isolation of each lyric. “The Composer” is more useful as a commentary on the possibilities of the more adventurous lyrics we have seen elsewhere. But its very publicness demands closer attention. As a direct address, “The Composer” takes the conventional vocative of the sonnet form and synthesises it with a projection outwards, into the realm of doxa (here represented by aesthetic debate). The insight of “Orpheus” is elaborated into an argument, and the fragility of the experience that the earlier poem describes seems more robust here, where music offers a limitless resource of unmediated connection between song and listener:

All the others translate: the painter sketches
A visible world to love or reject;
Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches
The images out that hurt and connect,

From Life to Art by painstaking adaption,
Relying on us to cover the rift;
Only your notes are pure contraption,
Only your song is an absolute gift.

The first line could apply retrospectively to the mechanisms of “Orpheus”, which had attempted to “translate” the ineffable aural experience into linguistic terms; here the process is cast aside and the musical perception is held at a distance. Making no attempt to translate, “The Composer” is effectively written in praise of isolation, where isolation is the means of subjective intensity. Philosophically, then, the argument is apparently a Romantic one at its centre, and it is the symbolic importance of music that excites Auden here. Through its publicness “The Composer” is a precursor to poems like “September 1, 1939”, which as we have seen espouse the symbolic terms of connection between citizens over the literal. Symbolism is the vehicle of the public lyric, and in the later thirties Auden’s modus operandi as a lyric poet is to clarify the nature and importance of a particular instance of the symbolic. As such, “The Composer” accepts and encourages a degree of idealisation (of the capabilities of music), provided that it is based on an accessible truth. Music is free of the stamp of representation that sullies the other arts (we note the echoes of

“Orpheus” in the pejorative trace to the painter’s “visible world”, with its affinity to poetry’s “adaption”).

The speaker’s dismissal of poetry is based on the business-like stuff of its composition (“Rummaging into his living”), its frequent biographical bent, and its manner of connection which “hurt[s]” to make its impact. We might reply that the very bases of his case are what make the engagement with poetry so valuable: the confrontation of fears, the relish of the craft, the impetus on the reader “to cover the rift”. But the case is knowingly simplistic, and this reminds us that we cannot equate Auden’s public mode with uncomplicated sincerity of expression, or if we do, then there are other matters to bear in mind. Light verse foregrounds its qualities of performance; the sonnets offer a comparable reading experience in that they frequently take on the sweeping, generalising aspects of public utterance. (“All the others translate...”).³⁵¹ In an interesting example of critical and poetic symbiosis, “The Composer” was written in the same year that Cyril Connolly produced *Enemies of Promise*, which identifies journalism and politics as two of the most dangerous enemies faced by a young writer.³⁵² Here Auden brushes against that danger, not by producing work that is reducible to those practices, but by inhabiting a comparable public mode. “The Composer” refers back to established forebears (the tribute, the epitaph) but projects its sentiments in a manner that is seen to apply to its contemporary setting. This is of course a neatly self-conscious way of acknowledging the simplifications and excesses which prey on the kind of writing unaware of its influence by “doxa”. The dangers remain, however; John Fuller argues that the lyric undertakes a risky dalliance with cliché from which it does not quite free itself.³⁵³ Furthermore we have already seen that other lyric songs, with their quasi-musical speaking voices, actually present victories for the particular over the general.³⁵⁴ The

³⁵¹ For this reason I would detach the sentiments of the sonnets from Auden’s viewpoint; Mendelson is clearly justified in doing so, given that his overarching project is to recount Auden’s intellectual development, but we can view the sonnets as subtle meditations on the value of, and possible sacrifices intrinsic to “public” poetry. Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 360-361.

³⁵² Connolly borrows terms from Book One of George Crabbe’s *The Village* [1783] to represent the enemies: journalism being “The Blue Bugloss”, politics being “The Thistles”. *Enemies of Promise* (London: Penguin, 1961), 103-115.

³⁵³ Fuller detects cliché in the central image of “the absolute gift” (*W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 268). But this might be to take the lyric’s “public mode” at face value: as I will suggest, we can rescue the lyric if we recontextualise it.

³⁵⁴ Taking the historical view, there is also the fear that the sentiments of Auden’s speaker are anyway untenable. Music has not always been viewed as immune to the complications of artistic address. Brad

sentiment of “The Composer” would seem, in the context of Auden’s own work, to be a moot point. This is a further example of the lyric’s “publicness”: it turns away from the qualities of Auden’s work on its own terms in order to perform a kind of experimental rhetoric. Yet it is possible to engage with the sentiment of the lyric as argument such that we loosen its “public” stiffness. The central point made by the speaker is that prizing the means and methods of representation can lead us away from the generative core of art, and in music such means are adeptly superseded by immediate contact with the generative core. I take “pure contraption” as related to the stricter sense of contraption, as in “contrivance”, meaning pure invention. Music is unbound by and not beholden to experience, when experience is understood here in the reductive sense as the quantifiable aspects of one’s life: the events, the movements, the beliefs, and the penumbra of doxology that surrounds the modern self in general. Music is the defiance of capitalizations like Life and Art, and it is a self-reflexive irony that Auden chooses the public sonnet with which to praise music for its attack on the dominance of the general over the particular.

As Auden segues into the concluding sestet we notice a crucial change of address, from composer to song itself:

Pour out your presence, O delight, cascading
The falls of the knee and the weirs of the spine,
Our climate of silence and doubt invading;

You alone, alone, O imaginary song,
Are unable to say an existence is wrong,
And pour out your forgiveness like a wine.

This alteration of focus insists on the space between artist and recipient as fundamental to the enhanced possibility of the art experience. Again, “The Composer” effectively describes what Auden is elsewhere attempting through a quasi-musical lyric poetry that seeks to minimise this space between the respective experiences of speaker and reader. So what applies to music as a matter of course can,

Bucknell’s analysis of Mallarmé’s musical aesthetic is useful here. Mallarmé asserted both the “fallen” nature of language (in agreement with Auden’s speaker), *and* used music as the emblem of a modernist “anti-expressivism”. For Mallarmé music does not represent “an inscrutable completeness” at all, but is comprised of the same representational “silences” as literary art (the gulf in lyric being between thing and word). Brad Bucknell, *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce and Stein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 35-36.

in the wider context of Auden's work, apply to the lyric as an attempt to push its communicative capabilities as far as possible. "The Composer" itself is more conventional, in comparison. We note here the metrical shift that introduces a trochaic rhythm, interspersed with pyrrhics which accentuate the long, chiming vowel sounds ("falls of the knee and the weirs of the spine, / Our climate of silence and doubt invading;"), as if in entirely conscious mimicry of the "cascading" music. But it is difficult to resist reading the lyric as a description of what Auden's poetry *could be* to the ambitious young poet (and in this my emphasis is similar to Mendelson's). The status of the "imaginary" is vital here; I read it as referring both to the locus of musical force, and to the wider structure of lyrical address which retains the vestiges of those elements of proximity to the generative core of art that music seems to demonstrate so readily. The keening emphasis on "alone" perhaps recognises the relative distance of literary art from a supposed purity of affect. The song "is unable to say an existence is wrong", that is, it is free of the messier aspects of moral judgement and appraisals. Song is a non-"saying", non-complicit mode of communication that exposes and fills "the climate of silence". As a public poem, "The Composer" is not a song in this respect; it is defined by its broadness of address. But other lyrics generate meaning of equal consequence to music: their meaning just has a qualitatively different nature. The value of lyric art is precisely as we have seen: in its enactment of our implication in the collective life, describing the reality of being-with at the level of thinking; in its orientation of our subjective retreat; and in its relation of how both modes variously collide to shape the self. Lyric is not suited to "forgiveness" in this respect. So where other poems attempt through quasi-musical techniques to "translate" another's experience in order to make it accessible, "The Composer" is happy to focus on the ideal, transcendent, non-translatable musical experience, while suggestively acknowledging the complexity of Auden's other work, beneath its "public" certainties.

If, of all the arts, music was alone in being exempt from the privations of "painstaking adaption" in twentieth century modernity, then Auden's own adaptations revived the musical model of proximity that had always been implicit in the form. Here I refer back to Northrop Frye's Romantic notion of the musicality of lyric, and what it does or does not subsequently allow. Frye contends that:

In lyric the turning away from ordinary experience means that the words do not resonate against the things that they describe, but against other words and sounds.³⁵⁵

This can help to summarise the significance of Auden's particular kind of musicality. I ventured earlier that the generic sense of lyric can be reinvested if we understand lyric as the poetic form premised upon and evocative of speech. With this in mind, and having seen that for Auden and his time the Romantic rejection of ordinary experience did not hold (where "ordinary experience" denotes the stuff of human interaction, and the questions of collective existence), I submit that a proper conception of song's role in the modern lyric impels a further detachment from a model of lyric poetry based on interiority, or Eliot's "sound of the poet talking to himself."³⁵⁶

Song represents the apex of the proximity that, to varying degrees, characterises all Auden's lyric work. In lyric, as in musical performance, the recipient or reader is predicated by the poet or singer. Such an introverted lyric as "Orpheus" might seem, on face value, to dispute this, suggesting instead that Auden's work is tied to a notion of the lyric as self-address, or of privileged interiority. Similarly, "Lay your sleeping head, my love" is ostensibly rooted in the conventional "I-You" structure of lyric where the reader is positioned simply as a disengaged onlooker. But in each case we saw that our response – elicited first by our own speech – is better described as being present in the basis of the lyric utterance, and that the journey into the interior we undertake in "Orpheus" for instance is actually an experiment in sustaining the proximity that (vocalised) lyric language conduces. That "Orpheus" does not include the lyric "I" is instructive: it is uttered from a place where individuation is tested, where the full extent of the mutuality between poet and reader can be posited in a discrete moment, before it necessarily ceases. An *extraordinary* experience is certainly being described, then, but the force of wonder resides in the recognition that an anterior proximity between particular perspectives grounds all expression. So when Frye stipulates that in lyric "words do not resonate against the things they describe, but against other words and sounds", he provides a fitting

³⁵⁵ Hosek and Parker eds., *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, 35.

³⁵⁶ Eliot, *The Three Voices of Poetry*, 4,

description of what happens in our encounter with the poem, insofar as the “other words and sounds” are understood by the reader as those of Auden’s speaker; and the “resonance” that arises is understood as a colloquy between particular experiences that quells the anxiety about a break between word and thing or of an isolated subjectivity, both of which are evoked by the difficult language and concatenation of the lyric. In short, even in the difficult “Orpheus”, Auden’s poetics owe to song their notion of outward projection.

Based on this colloquy, song exists in Auden’s lyric as an objective representation. Evidently its nature is not simply modal (that is, “lyrical” in the adjectival sense alone), and certainly not that of an anachronistic revival of a long-extinguished form of bardic poetry. Instead song is present as the structural principle behind our encounter with the page: it is an aesthetic manifestation of the binds of mutuality and co-presence that define life in and after twentieth century modernity. In the reader’s experience of works such as “Look, stranger, on this island”, “Lay your sleeping head my love” and “Orpheus”, the reduction to aggregate, the rule of the general over the particular, and the replacement of action by behaviour are all implicitly challenged. The sense of distanced proximity is perhaps evoked most compellingly in these of all Auden’s poems because, as Adorno’s emphasis indicated, it is given a more pronounced formal instantiation. Each builds upon modal lyrical features (the sonority of “Look stranger, on this island now”; the stately rhymes and metrical poise of “Lay your sleeping head, my love”; the extreme compression of “Orpheus”) to secure the central colloquy of voices in a distinctively generic way. In my final chapter I will examine a number of lyrics which present further tests to this communicative structure. What other experiences might such a colloquy sustain, and where else might it reach its limit points? Accounts of “Musée Des Beaux Arts” and the elegies to Yeats and Toller will provide the last close readings of this thesis before a general conclusion.

Chapter Seven: Suffering and Lyric's "Way of Happening"

I – Poetry's Testimony

In its structure of proximity underpinned by song, Auden's mid to late thirties work amounted to an aesthetic rendering of intensified mutual acknowledgement, or a community of the Just in miniature. Circumstances of the late thirties would set the importance of such a community into sharp relief, and Auden's poetry, in keeping with the cultural mandate decided earlier in the decade, responded to these circumstances throughout. The thematic concerns that orient his last work of the thirties seem to test what the proximal experience of reading lyric poetry might be able to sustain. What was the standing of the art experience in a world careening towards war on an unprecedented scale? The psycho-dramatic, minatory inflections of the early Audenesque had by this point been jettisoned, in favour of an art that recognised the sobering reality that "the will of the Unjust / Has never lost its power." These lines are taken from the sonnet sequence "In Time of War", the lion's share of which was written on Auden's journey through China, as a war correspondent, with Isherwood.³⁵⁷ Sonnet XIII, the first of the Chinese pieces, employs song in a familiar way, as an expression of the enduring possibilities of life. But the song is opposed in an important respect:

Certainly praise: let the song mount again and again
For life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face,
For the vegetable patience, the animal grace;
Some people have been happy; there have been great men.

But hear the morning's injured weeping, and know why:
Cities and men have fallen; the will of the Unjust
Has never lost its power; still, all princes must
Employ the Fairly-Noble unifying lie.

History opposes its grief to our buoyant song:
The Good Place has not been; our star has warmed to birth
A race of promise that has never proved its worth;

The quick new West is false; and prodigious, but wrong
This passive flower-like people who for so long

³⁵⁷ Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, 233-40.

In the Eighteen Provinces have constructed the earth.

The English Auden, 256.

These themes, and moreover, the voice that narrates them can be said to be representative of Auden's poetry at the end of the decade. The sonnet might be a rejoinder to the Rilkean notion of praise, which had recognised and sought to harness the possibilities of what Auden calls "life as it blossoms out".³⁵⁸ As a servant of this, life's enduring possibility, art itself is one contributor to "our buoyant song" and is obligated to provide accurate testimony to the oppositions of History: to be aware of its own standing. "The Good Place" is a concept that proceeds from philosophical idealisations and, we infer, from the misguided application of aesthetic resolutions to the irresolvable morass of circumstance that comprises empirical reality; as such, quite simply it "has not been". Chief among that morass of circumstance is the continual and unremitting reality of pain and suffering. It is "the morning's injured weeping" to which the song must attest. In the final triplet of the sonnet we hear Auden's instinctive vocalisation of this situation. We might call the stance of the voice Ariel-like at this point. Auden's detached impression of the Oriental peoples is fortuitous here: in its syntax and implied separation from human affairs ("but wrong / This passive flower-like people...") it has the feel and insight of the outsider: an ability to generalise, but on the basis of a rare empathy.³⁵⁹ The voice marks a space for itself, at once conversant with the reality of suffering, but able to resist the kind of self-elevation that would amount to a further affront to the particular experience of pain. It can speak in the first-person plural (XVI, 256) with the harrowing knowledge that the evil currently being perpetrated in the name of collective life is scripted by the individual:

³⁵⁸ The Eighth Duino Elegy comes to mind: "Between the hammers our heart / endures, just as the tongue does / between the teeth and, despite that / still is able to praise." Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting: Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Modern Library Press, 1995), 385.

³⁵⁹ Ariel's dislocation from humanity and his poetic sensitivity to the human form lead me to call Auden's stance in some of these poems Ariel-like. For example in *The Tempest* (1.2), Ariel to Prospero: "The King's son have I landed by himself, / Whom I left cooling of the air with sighs / In an odd angle of the isle, and sitting / His arms in this sad knot." *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, eds. John Jowett et al, 2nd Ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 1225. This stance gives rise to an interesting paradox when it works alongside the first-person plural, conveying the speaker's desire to separate and observe, and to be counted among the general sufferers. This is not to be confused with Auden's critical scheme given in his essay on Robert Frost, in which Ariel and Prospero are representative figures for beauty and truth respectively. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 335-336.

Yes, we are going to suffer, now; the sky
Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real;
The groping searchlights suddenly reveal
The little natures that will make us cry,

Who never quite believed they could exist,
Not where we were....

Behind each sociable home-loving eye
The private massacres are taking place;
All Women, Jews, the Rich, the Human Race.

“Private massacres” now seems to describe the violence taking place within the subjective experience; cognition itself has developed the characteristics of aggression, part of a psychological (dis)harmony that records the mutual determination of subject and object. What function could art, and lyric poetry in particular, fulfil in the face of this? The concept of the functionality of art has to be carefully negotiated on its own terms, as we will see in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” But what we observe of the voice in a number of poems of this period (and “September 1, 1939” belongs to this grouping) is their striving for an appropriate stance to testify to suffering, pain and fear, such that the requisite aesthetic distance from the reality of a given example does not overwhelm the poem. A close reading of “Musée Des Beaux Arts” will form the centrepiece of this crucial aspect of Auden’s late thirties work. These poems can be understood as part of a speculative ethical project, then, which attempts to define the limitations of poetic art whilst retaining a sense of its mimetic value, in the Adornian sense of occasioning the meeting of particularities.

The voice of “In Time of War” has both choral and monodic attributes. The first-person plural seems to best befit the expression of inter-subjectivity defined by common fear and anxiety; its zealous insistence on the statement of facts seems to be self-interrogating, in a manner that stems from the monodic tendency to question art’s provenance, operations and place within contemporary life. An emphasis on the actual is the leitmotif of the poem as a whole; “pain is real”; “And maps can really point to places / Where life is evil now: / Nanking, Dachau.” (XVI, 257); “They are and suffer; that is all they do:” (XVII). Elsewhere Auden’s shorter lyrics confront our inability to alter this state of affairs, contrasting the simultaneity of suffering with our habitual indifference as it unfolds before us. In this way the lyrics are exemplars of

complicit art. In “Musée Des Beaux Arts” we are all potential sufferers, but the simple fact that in most cases we do not actually suffer – that for the most part, we live according to regular, oblivious rhythms – cannot be explained away or falsely remedied in an aesthetic setting. The consideration of pain and suffering is perhaps the litmus test of poetry’s contiguity with empirical life, with the “real” that Auden’s speaker stresses throughout “In Time of War”. The claims made earlier in the decade for poetry’s power to affect (or at least for poetry’s centrality to emergent political programmes and collective organisation) ascribed to the form the quality of doxa or propaganda, which immolates the individual experience and arrogated to poetry an instrumental purposiveness. Auden’s final works of the decade comprise another form of opposition to this. As vehicles of the colloquy between different experiences, the *operations* of lyric poetry, as well as its occasional content or themes, are essentially opposed to the reduction of language to instrumentalism. But the precise contiguity between the lyric aesthetic and the “real” needed to be brought to light, and the approach to suffering would be key. In the later thirties works the shortcomings of poetic art are freely acknowledged but the art itself is finally vitalised as the poems try to countenance, as far as possible, the reality of suffering which they can never assuage.

We infer that poetry is implicated in the assertion made in Sonnet XXV of “In Time of War” (261): “Nothing is given: we must find our law.” Art cannot provide the “law”, or the directions for bringing the Good Life into existence. The law might only be found through a proper appreciation of what it is that distinguishes and limits human capability. The final sonnet of the sequence (XXVII, 262) seems to abandon the reaches of simile a step at a time, because figurative thinking is in a sense out of place here. The urgency to define what is markedly ours is clear:

We envy streams and houses that are sure:
But we are articted to error; we
Were never nude and calm like a great door,

And never will be perfect like the fountains;
We live in freedom by necessity,
A mountain people dwelling among mountains.

The first-person plural pronoun of “In Time of War” already encapsulates our distinguishing “freedom” and the concomitant “necessity” to which “we” are subject. The condition of suffering is ineradicable, but mutual testimony contains the only mitigating response it is possible to make. This is stated outright in the “Commentary” that comprises the epilogue of the sonnet sequence (268):

Some of our dead are famous, but they would not care:
Evil is always personal and spectacular,
But goodness needs the evidence of all our lives,

And, even to exist, it must be shared as truth,
As freedom or as unhappiness. (For what is happiness
If not to witness joy upon the features of another?)

The Commentary hinges upon competing voices, rival examples of collective will. The first is tyrannical, emanating from “the base” and “the violent / Who long to calm our guilt with murder”, “quieter but the more inhuman and triumphant.” Its argument is that “*Man can have Unity if Man will give up Freedom. / The state is real, the individual is wicked*” (266). The voice is heard “By wire and wireless”. Its opponents are less immediate but “if we care to listen, we can always hear them” (268):

*Only the free have disposition to be truthful,
Only the truthful have the interest to be just,
Only the just possess the will-power to be free.*

The moral centre of the whole piece, this voice of the Invisible College of the Humble, is most redolent of the poem’s dedicatee, E. M. Forster. It represents an ideal of intellectual courage that the final voice, the voice of Man, might emulate, but it must be conjured through the interrogation of those capitalisations like Justice, Unity and Liberty, rather than through their cynical, emotive application as doxa. We are effectively presented with opposed versions of the public realm, then. The “Good Place” is sketched by the Invisible College: it is an idealisation, but one that we cannot afford to lose. Significantly, for the voice of Man Auden employs lighter registers, giving an inflection of vulnerability to the oratorical climax of the poem (269):

*It's better to be sane than mad, or liked than dreaded;
It's better to sit down to nice meals than to nasty;
It's better to sleep two than single; it's better to be happy.*

Man concludes having acquired the confidence to orate and to invoke his own counter-collectivity, against the tyrant (269-270):

*Rally the lost and trembling forces of the will,
Gather them up and let them loose upon the earth,*

*Til they construct at last a human justice,
The contribution of our star, within the shadow
Of which uplifting, loving, and constraining power
All other reasons may rejoice and operate."*

"In Time of War" is a dramatisation of public speech, sustained by a quasi-Epic reading of the tensions within twentieth century modernity. The intervention of dramatic oratory – with speech presented as a crucible of the antagonism between tyranny and freedom – is another indicator of the latent contiguity of spoken poetry with political argument. The poem tells us that, though there is no physical agora - no idealised space for unfettered and uncompromised public speech - we should not assume that mass communications (the "wire and wireless") monopolise the forms of public life, even if they have come to mould the language of public discourse. The form of communication that poetry enshrines is such that it encourages the interrogation of Justice, Unity and Liberty: it marks the point at which the Good Place might be thought. As Lucy McDiarmid writes, Auden insisted on both the autonomy and coexistence of the poetic world with history,³⁶⁰ but perhaps he ought not to be regarded as a poet like Yeats and Eliot who "rejoice in the world that they can order perfectly, the work of art."³⁶¹ The value of the poetic experience lies in the balance contained within its manner of representation, and "In Time of War" illustrates as much. This balance is an order of (conventional, Aristotelian) mimesis that combines a strictness of *testimony* to the nature of the empirical real with an *evocation* of what lies within that real as a renewable possibility: the possibility of a different kind of public realm, one that would be based on the plurality of experience, a rehearsal of

³⁶⁰ Lucy McDiarmid, *Saving Civilisation: Yeats, Eliot and Auden Between the Wars*, 121.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

which we can undertake in the operations of poetry. This does not amount to the creation of a spurious and compensatory perfection in art; it is the reclamation of agency.

Although in its own way it clarifies the relationship between poetry and the “real”, “In Time of War” demonstrates the arrangement of suffering into a general pattern – a paradigmatic rather than a particular suffering. In shorter lyrics such as “The Voyage” (January 1938), the role of suffering in the personal experience is configured differently, though the actual experience of suffering is, once again, not approached. The “watcher upon the quay” is tied to a narrative of journey and arrival, a version of deferred experience that has stymied his capacity to live: “the false journey really an illness / On the false island where the heart cannot act and will not suffer”. To act and to suffer are aspects of what the speaker of “Musée Des Beaux Arts” will call the “human position.” In “The Voyage”, the watcher-traveller is given hope in his memory of “the places where he was well” and so “he believes in joy”. The belief in joy and the ability to suffer further refine what is markedly human:

And maybe the fever shall have a cure, the true journey an end
Where hearts meet and are really true: and away this sea that parts
The hearts that alter, but is the same, always; and goes
Everywhere, joining the false and the true, but cannot suffer.
The English Auden, 232.

Like the sea, art cannot “suffer”, but it can, as we are told in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”, “still persuade us to rejoice.” There is a confluence of perspective between “In Time of War” and “The Voyage” which relates to the absence of the lyric “I” in both pieces. The third person of the shorter poem and the first person plural of the longer both exemplify the humbled silence of the witness in this respect.³⁶² They

³⁶² This aspect of Auden’s later work does seem to correspond, to a degree, to Adorno’s description of artworks that “become entangled in the nexus of guilt. Whereas each artwork that succeeds transcends this nexus, each must atone for this transcendence, and therefore its language seeks to withdraw into silence.” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 134) Adorno explains this guilt in terms of art’s possible complicity with ideology. But the guilt, or rather, the evidence of profound recognition we intuit in Auden’s work has a different gravity because it proceeds from the direct comprehension of the reality of suffering. The lyrics’ inability to intrude into this reality cannot exclusively be called a symptom of their ideological compromise, as if they were perpetuating, in their aesthetic form, the social atomism of the twentieth century. I would argue that their refusal to *represent* suffering outright is based on an ethical moment, an immediate, unpremeditated response to the reality of suffering, which we can call ethical. Stylistically, Auden does not lose his muscular verbosity – his faith that language can go on speaking

attempt to speak *for* that suffering but never *of* it, and this is the nature of poetry's testimony. Representation of the personal experience is foregone, and the poems speak at a remove that records the testifying stance. This forms the basis of what art proves about ethics, that is, how art demonstrates "the inner impulse of cognition to know what is other as such."³⁶³ These pieces are acutely aware, as is "Musée Des Beaux Arts", of the remove patterned into representation; a remove which, for the question of suffering, contrarily helps us to understand what is essentially an incommunicable experience.

It is no accident that Auden is writing sonnet portraits of people and places which employ the observational narrative stance – "Rimbaud", "A. E. Housman", "Matthew Arnold", "Macao", "Hong Kong" – at the same time that "to suffer" becomes one of the key infinitives in his lexicon. This observational stance is at the heart of the ethical project of testimony to suffering. It characterises the extended portrait of "Voltaire at Ferney", reviving the scene of the great Enlightenment sage's model estate. Rather than bearing witness to pain on this occasion, the voice seems freely to profess the incapacity of art to impinge upon evil or to undermine evil's existence. The poem castigates Voltaire for his vanity at its conclusion:

Yet, like a sentinel, he could not sleep. The night was full of wrong,
Earthquakes and executions. Soon he would be dead,
And still all over Europe stood the horrible nurses
Itching to boil their children. Only his verses
Perhaps could stop them: He must go on working. Overhead
The uncomplaining stars composed their lucid song.

The English Auden, 240.

"Only his verses / Perhaps could stop them": we understand from the plangent final line (to which John Fuller takes exception)³⁶⁴ that his verses could do no such thing. The "Perhaps" that Voltaire uses to qualify his presumption does not go nearly far enough. The nurses' impulse to evil is implacable; it is as oblivious of Voltaire as the song of the "uncomplaining stars". "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" will describe the

in the face of suffering - but in the various pronominal removes we see in his work at this point there is an insinuation of profound recognition involving a species of (ethically attuned) silence.

³⁶³ Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 228.

³⁶⁴ Sensing an undercurrent of piety in the poem, Fuller reads the last line as "a bland and limiting comment on such purely secular efforts to achieve the Just Society..." (*W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 263). The castigation of Voltaire's vanity is not a specifically Christian one, however: Fuller's reading is perhaps too strongly biographical.

force of this oblivion once more, but we see that poetry's place in twentieth century modernity is augmented by it.

Elegy carries a number of interesting formal demands which, in the Yeats piece and in the later "In Memory of Ernst Toller" (May 1939), are amplified by Auden's speakers. We might say that they bear the contours of historical objectivity; their meditations on death take a specific historical shape. The occasion for (private) memory and for (public) memorialising is necessarily articulated alongside an account of the existing conditions for both the private and public realms. Although those realms are mutually productive and mutually confused in the present, the respective tones of the two elegies suggest that the understanding of death, and of memory, is variously claimable. The Yeats piece is the more rhetorical and impersonal, but the Toller elegy (perhaps because of Auden's personal knowledge of the deceased)³⁶⁵ finds the vocative swiftly, after two introductory stanzas in which we are told how "suffering" and forgiveness are also intertwined:

The shining neutral summer has no voice
To judge America, or ask how a man dies;
And the friends who are sad and the enemies who rejoice

Are chased by their shadows lightly away from the grave
Of one who was egotistical and brave,
Lest they should learn without suffering how to forgive.

Collected Poems, 249.

In contrast to the summer, there can be no "neutrality" for us; friends and enemies alike have to suffer before they can forgive. Like the sea of "The Voyage", the inhuman summer serves to confirm our responsibilities: we do have voices, we can judge, we can ask "how a man dies." This is what Auden's speaker proceeds to do: "What was it, Ernst, that your shadow unwittingly said?" John Fuller finds a Jungian source to the shadow,³⁶⁶ which grievers and deceased cast, but Toller's shadow is defined by our knowledge of his suicide. The speculative musing of the voice is the only kind of proximity to Toller's pain it can accomplish. Toller's fate may have been

³⁶⁵ Auden met Toller with Isherwood in 1936, at Sintra, Portugal. Later that year he assisted in the translation of some of Toller's lyrics for the play with music, *Nie Wieter Friede!*, or *No More Peace*. Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, 194.

³⁶⁶ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 290. "The shadow is everything that the individual does not want to be, the negative side of the personality."

psychologically driven (“Did the small child see something horrid in the woodshed”); it may have been compounded by historical trauma and his own persecution (“Or had the Europe which took refuge in your head / Already been too injured to get well?”); it may be explained by the sheer draw of oblivion, which Auden captures deftly with the image of the “bright little longings”:

For just how long, like the swallows in that other cell,
Had the bright little longings been flying in to tell

About the big and friendly death outside,
Where people do not occupy or hide;
No towns like Munich; no need to write?

Toller’s is a representative death, and the elegy must explain the quality of the death’s symbolism, but there is a restlessness in the voice which circles the unbreachable particular experience, the quiddity of one life which is a-symbolic and beyond expression or representation. Elegies such as this seem to awaken something dormant in the form: the tension between the (rational) setting of the life into a symbolic context and the contrary pull of the particular experience which belies that setting. The speaker’s final words to Toller are an unguarded gesture of benevolence in acknowledgment of the limits of what can be evoked of another’s death:

Dear Ernst, lie shadowless at last among
The other war-horses who existed till they’d done
Something that was an example to the young.

The shadow seems to suggest the simple burden of human existence in these lines; the burden of identity, psychology and history that determines how each individual will suffer. “Something that was an example to the young” is a direct provocation. Toller’s suicide might be condemned by some, but the real example referred to is his life: his intellectual courage, his capacity to suffer even as a man who took his own life. Having paid its own kind of necessarily speculative tribute to the suffering of Toller, the voice concludes in with emphatically general flourishes (250):

We are lived by powers we pretend to understand:
They arrange our loves; it is they who direct at the end
The enemy bullet, the sickness, or even our hand.

It is their to-morrow hangs over the earth of the living
And all that we wish for our friends: but existence is believing
We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving.

In the darkness of our exclusion from the particular, which only speculation can momentarily illuminate, what is required is a leap of faith: the belief that “We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving”; that human sympathy is real for all of its blindness and imperfections. The lyric voice – especially the elegiac lyric voice, mourning a particular life that can never again be encountered – is an investment in the notion that the individual experience can be known or expressed, and that the voice’s inevitable failures are themselves important, because the enquirer might better understand their capacity for empathy according to this process. Hence the trajectory pursued by the voice; the “powers” that we are “lived by” do not render us utterly passive because they create the conditions for this leap of empathetic faith.

We begin to appreciate in these examples, and those that follow and conclude this thesis, that the singularity of lyric poetry relates to its ethical contiguities, in tandem with those we have discussed in relation to love, politics and the *vita activa*. Singularity is understood as that feature of the art experience which defines art’s separation from everyday cognition and societal structures in modernity. It is, in short, a way of describing the non-practicality of art. But in works concerned with suffering, with death and memory, we understand most acutely that this does not throw us back into the self-contained confines of the aesthetic experience. Auden’s consideration of these themes, and the voices he produces to render them, amount to the final aspect of his early career, for which the exact nature of the value of poetry formed a crucial touchstone. His work had always resisted the mythological exaltation of poetic language (Adorno’s phrase)³⁶⁷, but the experience of reading him can be said to offer a crystallisation of the ethical moment. This is, of course, nothing like saying that poetry is morally improving. Rather, the ethical possibilities that secure collective life to its moorings are glimpsed in the confrontation of suffering: an irreducibly particular experience beyond our immediate comprehension. This lack of

³⁶⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 352 (Draft Introduction). The remark is directed against Heidegger, who is said to be guilty of such exaltation, and guilty of the reduction of art to the mere “arena for philosophical theses.”

comprehension is itself refracted by the colloquy between poet and reader, and made directly perceptible. Lyric singularity is not a question of rapture; it is instead proof of the form's strict objectivity. In works that approach suffering, pain, and death, the shape of our coexistence casts its shadow most swiftly over the expressions of the subjective experience. Our speaking the lyrics in turn emblematises a chain of mutual dependence: this is what "existence" amounts to, in the lexicon of the Toller elegy, and for the late thirties works as a whole. In light of suffering, the relationship between the lyric experience and the realm of action in the empirical real is shown finally to be analogical. These lyrics instate, as others had done in each specific thematic context, the truth about the necessary estrangement of the particular from our grasp, but poetry's "way of happening" retains its sense of entitlement in illuminating the meeting of particularities.

II – Two Close Readings

"Musée Des Beaux Arts": December 1938. *The English Auden*, 237.

"Musée des Beaux Arts" seems to sit uncomfortably with the monody-choral schema of lyric tendencies outlined previously, chiefly because it is a poem about art's ability to convey the absence of empathy - the non-recognition between one experience and another - at its most severely pronounced. It is an anti-lyric in this sense. Monody describes the distanced proximity to a particular experience proffered to the reader by lyric, often with the emphasis on the latter aspect - on the potential for recognition. "Musée Des Beaux Arts" constructs an obverse mode of communication between speaker and speaking reader, insisting on the necessity of generalising when we consider the suffering of another, and finally suggesting that some experiences cannot be approached, cannot be relayed. Its voice performs a kind of mimicry of the "Old Masters" themselves, seconding in its blankly objective tone the bareness of Breughel's presentation of Icarus's death.³⁶⁸ We recall from Adorno that art's

³⁶⁸ Edward Mendelson detects the influence of Christianity on the voice, which responds to "Christianity's great and enduring transformation of classical rhetoric: its inversion of the principle that the most important subjects require the highest style." (*Early Auden*, 363) This is clearly a tenable inference, and the final call for humility suggested in the poem might also have a Christian provenance,

acknowledgement of its own complicity in suffering may be the germ of its true importance. Suffering is understood by Adorno as the mutilation of the particular by the general in the form of concepts, which is a way of describing the fate of those isolated, unrecorded instances of pain that constitute history.³⁶⁹ Here Auden's speaker intuitively that his own voice - the refined, urbane voice of artistic contemplation, doubly removed from Icarus's death detailed in the painting - is in effect an analogue for the perspective of all those on the outside looking in, all those who, powerless, look upon the suffering of another. Moreover the mode of ekphrasis assumed by the speaker indicts the project of description *per sé*, where the reality of pain can only be conjured in the abstract. There is something obscene in the poise of art, then, and Auden is implicitly aware of this.

It begins,

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters: how well they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
 dully along;

Auden's speaker seems to take on the contemplative mantle of ekphrasis a little too readily; the syntactical arrangement of the opening line carries a suggestion of indulgent, almost post-prandial speechifying, which the rest of the poem gradually vitiates. The hypertaxis of the line is ironically self-referential: (this is a poem) "About suffering"; but can that syntactical privilege be affectively conveyed?³⁷⁰ The poem asks, from the beginning: In what way can there be any affective testimony to suffering, one that exceeds contemplation? The voice itself has no specific experience of its own to relate, but beneath its generalising balance there is a hint of recollected pain, the pain that is present as a possibility in all our lives: "how well they understood / Its human position; how it takes place / ". The "human position" of suffering is defined by its incongruity, its raw actuality amidst the mundane. "Human

but the recognition of the mutuality of suffering and indifference need not be exclusively formulated according to Christian theology.

³⁶⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 261. The rhetorical question Adorno employs to conclude *Aesthetic Theory* makes the importance of suffering to his project explicit: "...what would art be, as the writing of history, if it shook off the memory of accumulated suffering."

³⁷⁰ John Fuller makes the perceptive remark that "There is a rich double meaning in this opening word, for it is Brueghel's very circuitousness of approach ("about" in a different sense) that Auden is interested in." *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 266.

position” also implies that suffering is in a sense constitutive of “the human”; indeed that the truth about humanity is conveyed in the juxtaposition of ineffable pain with the unbroken continuance of quotidian affairs. No matter how closely determined or sustained by interrelationships, the individual is thrown back within the confines of the self at its most desolate, painful moments.³⁷¹ The stark formulation “how it takes place”, with its forceful spondee at the last two syllables, lingers at the line ending before the clause is continued (“While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along”), becoming a suitably literal statement of suffering’s ever-presence. This is a humbled lyricism.

The ethical nature of suffering, it would seem, inheres in non-recognition. In this sense the isolated, suffering individual feels the brutal exclusion from normal human rhythms as the core of their experience: my pain is so intense, your ignorance so pronounced, that this opposition is the core of suffering, giving pain its psychical bearings. The conversational meter of Auden’s lines (Mendelson calls them “casually irregular”)³⁷² recognises that any attempt to rhetoricize or to assume that the aesthetic could fully render the experience of suffering would be to estrange oneself from the other’s pain even further than is necessary in a movement of generalising self-regard, and would ascribe to art the total capacity to reveal all experiences. The question of suffering, as a “question”, already commits the sin of erasing the particular experience. The most that art can do is render the coexistence of the acute with the mundane, not in the form of a question or with the false assumption of total access to experience, but with an uninflected veracity:

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:

These lines expand on suffering, and recount that the generation of meaning among human groups is predicated on the indifference of others, the Nativity (“the

³⁷¹ Arendt would write about this subject in *The Human Condition* (50-51): “Indeed, the most intense feeling we know of, intense to the point of blotting out all other experiences, namely, the experience of great bodily pain, is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all. Not only is it perhaps the only experience which we are unable to transform into a shape fit for public appearance, it actually deprives us of our feeling for reality...”

³⁷² Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 363.

miraculous birth”) being a good example. With the glimpse of syllabic uniformity we hear in the halting dactylic “reverently, passionately”, Auden dextrously transmits the fleeting creation of significance that transcends the vast realm of unknowable reality, both human and inhuman. His use of the “Children” as markers of this reality is another masterstroke (and not simply as the counterparts to the infant Christ). Here they typify indifference and happy self-absorption: they are people rather than symbolic ciphers, and the shade of flowing trochees we hear in “did not specially want it to happen” conveys their lack of interest, their carrying on with things. “There always must be” proceeds from the earlier “how it takes place”; together with “must run its course” and “how everything turns away” in the second strophe these line endings comprise the arteries of the poem: blank statements of suffering’s unalterable existence. The bathos introduced in the speaker’s observations of the Old Masters is implied as self-critical:

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

The dogginess of the dogs’ lives and the limits of our own perception, which falls down where it attempts to convene with the sufferer, are not so far apart: they share the same tautological structure. When we perceive suffering, we become aware of perception’s failings, but we go on with the humanness of our human lives. The simple fact of looking is all there is; the way that Breughel looks upon the scene of Icarus’s demise as its creator; the way that Auden’s speaker looks upon the paintings; and the way that, in speaking the poem, we look upon this series of removes and occupy the furthest point from the pain itself. In situating us here, the poem alerts us to the various barriers built into the aesthetic, barriers that separate us from the truth of the particular experience. But with regard to suffering, these barriers are the preservers of dignity. The artist has portrayed the coexistence of suffering and normality, and so has testified to suffering as best as possible because he has rendered our place within indifferent humanity, by making us newly aware of the non-suffering, contemplative nature of our response.

That suffering is incommensurate with its surroundings and is incommunicable to us means that it cannot be downgraded or explained away. It obtrudes into human affairs, even though we must “turn away”:

In Brueghel’s *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

As ekphrasis, that is, as a further description of a representation, “Musée Des Beaux Arts” builds upon Breughel’s insight into the fundamental removes of suffering. Auden’s speaker’s description of the painting instates the distance between thought and the reality of pain, and in doing so suggests that the greatest challenge of ethics is to grasp the simultaneity of suffering and normality in an immediate rather than a retrospective or contemplative way. This simultaneity implicates the form of painting itself, which presumes to render the full scene, but is only a visual, silent account of the event, hence the speaker’s supplementary musings on the sound of Icarus’s fall (“the ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry”). The poem at hand, for its part, is both a gesture of dismay at being unable to approach those who suffer, and a measure of respect for the resistance of that experience to any kind of representation. That is why “Musée Des Beaux Arts” makes no use of the vocative, for instance. It attends instead to the generalising mode in which suffering “must” (necessity being the operative mode of the speaker’s thinking here) be considered, rather than fully understood. It is artworks themselves, as well as people, that face the danger of becoming an “expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing” before it “sailed calmly on”. The word “amazing” is glaringly imprecise, signifying lazy, self-satisfied contemplation and implying the absence of trauma. While it would be obscene to assume that the poem could intrude into the sufferer’s experience, it would be doubly obscene to abandon the attempt at understanding altogether. Auden finds the only tenable ground between these two unsatisfactory alternatives; the voice of “Musée Des Beaux Arts” strikes us first for its cosmopolitanism, but finally sounds more like one of humility.

“In Memory of W. B. Yeats”: February 1939. *The English Auden*, 241-243.

In addition to containing some of Auden’s most emphatic pronouncements on the nature and value of poetry, this famous elegy to Yeats allows us to consider more precisely the underlying assumptions of communication between poem and reader in twentieth century modernity, and to reflect upon the version of the public realm that the poem invokes. “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” is quite clearly as much a testimony to the fate of poetry as to the life of one great man; the voices that we encounter over the three sections of the work combine to evoke, and in a sense perform this fate. Far from being an indictment of poetry’s limitations, it is in fact an impassioned argument for its true worth, and a suitable note on which to conclude.

We recall that in its ancient life monody was a ritualised act of mourning between poet and people, a melic recitation of collective grief based on physical proximity. Elegy, evolving according to the page-bound life of lyric, might be said to have an atavistic relationship to the original Greek monody, marked as it is by the occasion of death, but (as distinct from the later Toller elegy) the death of a public figure can be a curiously low-key affair, as we see in the first stanza:

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the air-ports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
O all the instruments agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Auden’s speaker describes the mute suspension of the winter landscape as it metaphorically registers the “disappearance” of the poet; the frozen brooks are in

stark contrast to the cornucopias which Yeats himself so often invoked; the “almost deserted” air-ports are a consciously modern touch, as if the evolutions of technological modernity seen in Yeats’s lifetime “almost” respond to his death themselves. These suggestions of metaphoric correspondence between the death of the poet and world at large are, as Anthony Hecht points out,³⁷³ tentative and only fleetingly sustained. Auden’s speaker soon reneges on the implied pathetic fallacy, no longer tenable in mechanised twentieth century modernity:

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

There is only the human intervention as opposed to the natural world, only the conscious project of memory which can rescue the poet from oblivion. This sequence between the first and second stanzas realises something in the nature of mourning, framing a contest between the fleeting intensity of the particular death and the erasure and oblivion by which time proceeds; and the poem will confess the similarity between artistic posterity and this immolating movement. As in mourning we confront this oblivion, so too in the art experience, as the successive sections of the poem will show.

“In Memory of W. B. Yeats” is more than an elegy; it is a poem about the workings of poetry in twentieth century modernity; about the quality of knowledge that art can foster; about the essential non-recognition between the experience of art and the forms of conventional, instrumental knowledge which surround it. Only by bearing these points in mind can we explain the full meaning of the poem’s famous edict, “poetry makes nothing happen”. Crucially it is speech (“By mourning tongues”) that relates poetry to death and the act of mourning. Speaking becomes a signifier for the human, the vessel of memory essentially opposed to the brute indifference of nature (“The wolves ran on... / The peasant river was untempted...”), and resistant to the oblivion that death, in the non-human world, necessarily means. The project of memory in mourning seeks to remain close to the particular life, but Yeats’s public

³⁷³ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 141-142.

death prompts no such closeness. We notice in the first stanzas a silence regarding Yeats himself: no sustained attempt is made to recount the particularity of his existence. Yet this silence about the particular is not exclusive to Auden's poem. It is among the oldest conventions of elegy, as Daniel Albright argues; there is an "avoidance of the particular" that characterises the form.³⁷⁴ (Justin Replogle fails to appreciate this when he condemns Auden for ignoring "Yeats the man".)³⁷⁵ In a manner akin to "Musée Des Beaux Arts", the elegy orbits an incommunicable experience. Not only the particularity of the man but the particularity of his dying cannot be approached. Traditionally elegy leaves no room for pain or for fear, that is, for accurate homage to the experience of dying, and Auden's elegy abides by this. Elegy draws the implicit distinction between death and dying. Dying is ineluctably personal, an ineffable experience, indeed the end of all experience; and as such it cannot be rendered. Death, however, has an impersonal facet, one that is ineluctably for others, in that those left behind are required to endure, and to speak about their response to death. Auden's speaker is representative of the wider necessity to speak, because through that speaking a version of the public realm can be reclaimed from the expanse of society, as we reflect on the death of the great poet and its wider significance as a barometer of change.

Consequently elegies are oriented towards the public life rather than the private, and to the future rather than the past.³⁷⁶ they encourage public speech, and our speaking the poem is a synecdoche for this. The dead Yeats bequeaths "himself" to the living; Auden's image of the poet as civic space, evacuated by Yeats so as to be occupied by his readers, paints him as the highest archetype of human connectivity, even as we detect a touch of fearfulness (even personal horror) to its tone. The dead poet undertakes the most laudable sacrifice by becoming his admirers:

The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed: he became his admirers.

³⁷⁴ Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*, 185.

³⁷⁵ Replogle, *Auden's Poetry*, 136.

³⁷⁶ Mendelson's verdict on Auden's elegies, that they are "unlike any others" because they "use the example of the dead in order to teach the living" (*Early Auden*, 366) is perhaps a little overstated in this respect.

Death can be thus understood as the disparity between the singular life and the elusive, uncontrollable, and finally unknowable process of impersonal memory, a process which characterises all deaths but which is intensified upon the death of a poet, whose inner life has been and will continue to be recounted and reshaped by his readers (“And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections”). Memory is creative before it is preservative; the sequence that leads from the individual life to the collective memory almost resembles the structure of a non-sequitur: “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living”. Auden imagines poetry as form of consumption, a devouring of the experience of another which gives sustenance before, if we pursue the metaphor, being excreted. Such a pungently biological image suggests that the workings of memory follow the same brutal logic of the life processes: that poetry, though intensely cerebral, is afforded no special privilege. But this image also suggests that poetry has a tangible place in the world, which must then be clarified. It is at this point in the first section that the pitch of the public voice becomes dissonant, aiming for deflation rather than uplift:

A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

The voice slips out of its inherited, formal poise, shrugging off the propriety of conventional elegy. There are no profound sympathies between the dead poet and the world at large, just a paltry “few thousand” who will remember “something slightly unusual”. The tone is cynically, studiously unemphatic, as if the notions of the poet’s heroism suggested beforehand were illusory.

Elegy is positioned by this alteration of tone as a curiously apposite form in twentieth century modernity. It is as though the mechanics of public mourning expose something fundamental about the nature of modern being-with. The distance implied between the singular life of the dead and the dispassionate stances of the surviving observers, which elegy has always been based upon, now protrudes out of the form and seems to describe the situation of interrelationships among the living. The cynicism of the voice at this point seems conditioned by this distance. The refrain “O all the instruments agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day” seems hollow

this second time: John Fuller notices that “instruments” carries the connotation of the disinterested pursuit of fact,³⁷⁷ allying the voice with blank scientific objectivity. The management of tone is everything; Auden’s speaker is in the process of shaping the traditional emotional reserve of elegy – its respectful avoidance of the particular life – into a representation of a wider inability to connect at this time. The form itself becomes a commentary on how the poverty of our collective relationships reduces our capacity to live.

The second section answers the underlying sourness and pessimism of the first’s conclusion. Here the voice is personable, licensed, and significantly, speaks in the vocative:

You were silly like us: your gift survived it all;
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself; mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

“Silly like us”: the voice avoids both the pretensions of formality patterned into the page-bound elegy and the previous studied cynicism by simply speaking a phrase shorn of all poetising. It finds recourse in the immediate evocation of another that the vocative allows. Yeats’s life is still absent, his “gift” being of greater importance to the speaker for what it transcended (“The parish of rich women, physical decay / Yourself”). Yet the vocative prepares the ground for the most captivating lines in the poem which follow it, as if the speaker’s grasping the act of clear communication has prompted a new order of insight. It is perhaps ironic that “poetry makes nothing happen”, surely one of Auden’s most quoted lines, is done irreparable violence when removed from this stanza and installed as some kind of maxim. We can only fully understand it in relation to the concluding lines, “it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth”, and to the intervening lines, which tell us that poetry “survives / In the valley

³⁷⁷ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, 287.

of its saying where executives / Would never want to tamper". (Auden's revision of "saying" to "making", as well as drawing our attention to the original Greek sense of the poet as maker, minimises what Edward Callan calls "the expectation of inspired Bardic utterance";³⁷⁸ this is a canard to the poet, not to the speaking-reader whose own "saying" determines poetry's distinctive "way of happening.") These lines are a clear criticism of the precisely the kind of reductive, objectifying thinking that only affords the status of event - that which happens - to that which has a clear instrumental use. Why else would the executives never want to tamper with poetry? Instead, poetry "flows south" and escapes the oblivion of passing time and the other, equally dangerous oblivion of submission to the instrumental. It opposes the reduction of life to instrumental use; it pursues a different route of meaning "*From* ranches of isolation and the busy griefs" to a site of privileged communication between poem and reader, no less objective for being non-instrumental. It is multiform ("a way of happening", emphasis on the gerund), rather than monolithic (as conjured by "makes nothing happen"). In effect then, the second section is a description of monody: of how a sense of distanced proximity comes to be. This kind of poetry does not "happen" with the finality of an act; it is "a way of happening" through the simplest of tools, "a mouth". The second section corrects the cynicism of the first; the first had started to think from the perspective of minimising, reductive instrumentalism ("A few thousand will think of this day..." / "O all the instruments agree"). In response the second reclaims the circuits of poetry, circuits of connection between the voice of the poem and the voice of the reader, to quell the suggestion that in twentieth century modernity poetry has no truth. The poem becomes a critique of our limited conception of "happening", not one of poetry itself.³⁷⁹ The line in particular is a riposte to the pretensions of the decade, and so depends on its context, but to interpret it as a standalone indictment of poetry is to misunderstand its own character as poetic language.

As a result, the inference that "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" declares the final insignificance of poetry fails to appreciate the poem's subtle concatenation. Perhaps

³⁷⁸ Edward Callan, *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect*, 150.

³⁷⁹ Arendt examines the instrumentalization of action – the predominance of means-ends thinking in human affairs – and finds its beginnings in the replacement of acting with making, whose source is Plato. "It has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents." *The Human Condition*, 220.

owing to its influence by the prose piece, “The Public Vs. the late Mr. William Butler Yeats”, it has the structure of a dialogic argument.³⁸⁰ The first section presents its thesis; it is then refuted in theory by the second and in practice by the third. The third section is as close as Auden comes to writing monody in its strictest mournful sense (“Earth, receive an honoured guest;”). It is the final statement of lyric power, a song of mourning and of time’s passage (as stanzas unfairly excised from *Collected Poems* show):

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent,
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

Anthony Hecht and Daniel Albright have remarked on Auden’s use of Yeats’s favoured meter in this section, trochaic tetrameter,³⁸¹ which Yeats derived from Blake before him. These stanzas are a restatement of poetry’s redemptive qualities: time destroys the individual, but in writing poetry the author produces and makes available to his readers a threshold between thought and action, in Arendt’s sense of action as the illumination of the possibilities of human freedom. The poem is something that we partake in that will persist across time,³⁸² this is why time “worships” language. The third section also tells us that the follies of an individual life are redeemed by time “with this strange excuse”; Kipling and Paul Claudel will be pardoned, presumably for their right-wing politics. “Pardon” is also something that is granted to poetry itself at times when its practical uselessness in the face of disaster is most apparent:

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,

³⁸⁰ *The English Auden*, 389-393.

³⁸¹ Hecht, *The Hidden Law*, 148-149; Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*, 198.

³⁸² In “The Public Vs. the late Mr. William Butler Yeats” the poet is said to have been an exemplary contributor in this respect by his defending advocate: “The social virtues of a real democracy are brotherhood and intelligence, and the parallel linguistic virtues are strength and clarity, virtues which appear ever more clearly through successive volumes by the deceased.” *The English Auden*, 393.

And the living nations wait
Each sequestered in its hate;

The circuits of connection that poetry enshrines through the mutuality of voices
“persuade us to rejoice” and emblematises the ongoing possibility of decency (“Make a
vineyard of the curse”), empathy (“Sing of human unsuccess”) and recovery:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

“Praise” and “rejoice” are conventional elegiac touchstones that have themselves been
“modified” here.³⁸³ They celebrate not just the life of the poet and his great works,
but the power of his art as a species of communion, frequently compromised yet
finally preservative of the freedom of thinking. “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” testifies
to this freedom in the form of an argument and as a singular art experience. It
dramatises poetry’s continuing ability to surpass the habitual thinking of its time and
to involve the reader in its unique colloquy.

Conclusion.

In positing distanced proximity as the defining aspect of our experience of
Auden’s thirties lyrics, I have tended to place the emphasis on the latter component by
considering how each of the broad groupings comprising Auden’s thirties work (love,
lightness, the political, the song) reveal an underlying closeness between experiences
in the age of mass society. This closeness coheres and becomes explicable in the
context of the spoken lyric: the concept of the lyric voice was demonstrated to signify
much more than the assumed voice of the page. Recent critical work on Auden, it was
observed, has tended to pursue the textual at the cost of the experiential. For the voice
of the page to be affective rather than merely an isolable textual feature, and for the

³⁸³ Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” 130 is a good example: “Far off thou art, but ever nigh; / I have thee
still, and I rejoice; / I prosper, circled with thy voice; I shall not lose thee tho’ I die”. *In Memoriam*, ed.
Erik Gray (London: Norton, 2004) 96. Albright (*Lyricality in English Literature*, 198-199) and Hecht
(*The Hidden Law*, 149) notice that the “voice / rejoice” rhyme is also one of Yeats’s favourites.

nature and degree of closeness between poet and reader to be brought to the brightest light, our own speaking is required. Owing to its musical genealogy and to its particular poetics, the lyric can be said to manifest an alternative form of proximity. Proximity, we might say on this account, orientates the form at its base: the reality effect of lyric depends upon our approaching the experience represented therein. But we ought not to overlook the other aspect of distanced proximity. The element of distance is perhaps harder to account for, yet it is just as important in conveying Auden's achievement. I have remarked throughout that, in each of the broad groupings, working in tandem with the gravitational pull towards proximity we find the maintenance of a space into which the reader cannot intrude. In love poetry this translated into our exclusion from the extremity of psychic and erotic union experienced by the speaker and his lover. In light poetry this amounted to the distance indicated by proxy. There, the ease of access into the choral mode, the reassurances and insights it provided were given at the expense of a certain particularity of response: in other words, our response was felt to be one of many. By contrast, in a political context the maintenance of distance pertained to the absolutely singular moment of decision, explored most profoundly in "Spain 1937", that is the individual's alone, often against external demands and even against the direction of history itself. In the context of the lyric song, "Orpheus" illustrated that this element of distance is patterned into the lyric aesthetic, such that it provides a safeguard for particular experiences to approach one another. There can be no proximity, we found, without the distanced element. The ideal of total correspondence between poet and reader, as representing the final goal of art generally, is ultimately chimerical. At the moment when the speaker of lyric marshals our response most palpably we wonder instead (Adorno's term would be shock) at the discrete experience in relation to which our own is singularly understood.

"Orpheus" is the most lucid connecting poem between this present chapter and the previous, then, because in the poems examined here the element of distance is thematic as well as experiential. "Musée Des Beaux Arts" showed us that the element of distance, when the question of suffering is treated artistically, is preservative of a fundamental dignity. What cannot be approached cannot be exchanged. Adorno argues that this sober reflection on the limits of the aesthetic guards against the exchange mentality, forestalling the assumption that the experience of suffering could

be reduced to readily exchangeable matter. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" complements the emphasis on the limits of the subjective capacity for empathy with an exploration of the public mode. As part of the history of the poet after death, and as part of an account of the dispersal of the individual life into the nebulous realm of literary and cultural history, this element of distance describes the movement of history from the individual to the unknowable collective. As such the implied violence to the individual life is confronted, but it is this violence that allows for the generation of meaning which can circulate anew as the poet becomes his admirers. The elegiac mode provided a resonant formal instantiation, where distance from the life of the dedicatee is a constituent part of the elegy's stance. From this recognition of distance as the guarantor of interpretative freedom, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" proceeds to restate and example poetry's "way of happening." Auden's lyric poetry is testimony to an always imperilled truth - that one's experience is not exchangeable; that, in spite of the reduction of life to quantifiable material, in spite of the dissolution of the particular under the pressure of the aggregate, one's particular capacity to think and respond is paramount.

This thesis has attempted to conjure lyric poetry's "way of happening". The question of singularity, one of the key terms of the post-theoretical lexicon, is ultimately a question about genre, or better, about the work of a particular author within a given genre. Having recorded the debates surrounding the possibility of using the term lyric in a generic sense, as opposed to a modal one, I concluded that what the lyric induces, to a distinctive extent among the poetic forms, is speech. I choose the infinitive "to induce" carefully here: it would be flatly incorrect to maintain that the textual footings of the lyric poem are simply a means to a spoken end; I noted the strain of lyric which turns away from the inducement to speech and involves itself in the problems of the page as its chief calling. The inducement to speak, I argued, applies to Auden's early lyric work specifically: I do not posit it as a solid indicator of genre to be freely applied to all poets. Rather, it is submitted as the defining aspect of Auden's particular configuration of the form. Speech obtains at both ends of the lyric encounter with Auden: as supporting the nature of the lyric utterance, and as the crucible of its reception. Consequently the term "lyric" benefits from a generic rather than a modal orientation in the context of Auden's work, because the generic vantage point makes it possible to discuss the materiality of lyric language in more depth, and

to resist an overtly textual emphasis that the trends of post-modern readings of Auden encouraged. Further to this, Heidegger's concepts helped to refine our sense that the materiality of lyric – its method of “preserving” – is rooted in speaking, with regard to both the atavisms of the form in Greek melic poetry, as we saw in Chapter Three, and the urgencies of its twentieth century incarnation. Chapter Two had made clear that the resources of lyric in this respect predated the 1930s, but that Auden – attuned to emergent position of language in the mass communications nexus in tandem with his grasp of conventional lyric poetics – revived the sense of lyric's historical address, at a time in which the valence of poetic expression was seen to be newly open to question. This is to say that Auden revived the lyric's capacity to crystallise the movements of thought, in language that speaks to (and with) the reader through and beyond the doxology of the labile public realm in the 1930s; his lyric opened spaces where the terms of thinking were seen to be put at stake, and where new terms could come to expression. This is the measure of his singularity.

The development of the social combine of public and private realms, then, recounted in detail by Hannah Arendt, formed the shifting ground of Auden's lyric achievements. Even in his earliest work of late twenties and early thirties Auden had begun to intuit not only the attendant restrictions that his age was installing on poetry, but, more importantly, the dimensions of possibility that were being made available. Monody and chorus were submitted as the key terms in a theory of reader-response applying especially to Auden, and they allowed us to describe the experience of reading him in his many different poetic entities as his gift developed, as well as to account for the new grounds for lyric in the age of the masses. In this sense it was in his unrivalled poetic range that Auden fulfilled and redefined the self-imposed obligations of his generation to be “responsible”. The trajectory of my chapters, separated loosely into thematic categories yet demonstrating a good deal of porosity, aimed to record Auden's developing response to this culturally prevalent command to be responsible in one's art. We saw that the question of responsibility obtruded into expressions of love in Chapter Three; in Chapter Four we saw that contrary to appearances, notions of responsibility governed Auden's mastery of light verse and finally secured its importance to his canon as part of a general refutation of totalitarian violence against the public realm and misuse of public language; responsibility clearly informed the various anxieties attested in Auden's political work in Chapter Five

(where “political” referred to the terms of collective life); it shaped Auden’s engagement with the fundamental aspects of the lyric form in song in Chapter Six, producing an outward-facing address which crystallised the conjunction of public and private; finally responsibility reached its most profound and urgent articulation in Auden’s work at the close of the decade, as examined in this chapter. Here Auden’s lyric took the reality of suffering as its central motif and attempted to instate through the operations of the form an aesthetic synecdoche for ethical recognition, in order to counter our inaction and powerlessness in the face of that suffering.

In Auden’s hands lyric solicits the colloquy between particular experiences, and so proves its lasting value. As we have seen in close readings throughout, the lyric is not based upon an ideal of unsullied communication between such particulars, but rather upon a momentary meeting, the transience of which defines the central aspect of the form’s worth. Though this meeting is difficult to render critically, and though it has no direct application in the material world, the standing of lyric poetry is finally elevated as its result. Auden’s work lends new meaning to lyric poetry in and after twentieth century modernity because it rearticulates the privilege of poetic language to describe one’s relationship to reality and to others. For this reason versions of lyric which see interiority alone as the guiding premise of the form, or for which poetic language is primarily a demonstration of the general point that linguistic structures of meaning are weaker than may first be apparent, miss what Auden everywhere makes clear. Lyric offers a fresh point of contact, a “way of happening” in which the reader, as one half of the colloquy, glimpses the wider possibilities of thinking that always backlight the possibilities of poetry.

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